

# JEEVADHARA

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## THE UNSUNG HEROINES

WHY THIS OPPRESSION OF WOMEN ?

*Jessie Tellis Nayak*

WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND REPRODUCTIVE TECHNOLOGIES

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SHARIAH: A REFLECTION ON THE ISSUE

*James Narithookil*

MEDITATION ON THE BANK OF THE YAMUNA

*G. Gispert Sauch*

THE GOSPELS AND THE LIBERATION OF ASIAN WOMEN

*Bernie Silva*

# **JEEVADHARA**

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## Editorial

"Millions of women arose and shouted: No one will ever dictate to us again, and they became typists."

These words of Chesterton might cause a smile. But it portrays the irony of the present situation of women's liberation. In spite of the growing effort on the part of women all over the world to claim their rights and dignity, their oppression and subjugation seem to continue unabated.

Sexism along with racism belongs to the worst form of oppression. The root of this oppression is a biological fact over which one has no control. The injustice and discrimination against women cover every area of social living and every stage and aspect of life. They are well-known and need not be listed here. The recent media exposure of female infanticide and sex-determination tests to eliminate female foetus are but only the tip of an ice-berg.

Traditional cultures, institutions, customs and myths go to reinforce the stereotyped images and roles of women and legitimize the unjust treatment meted out to them. What is most deplorable is that religions often aggravate their condition by the values, attitudes and practices that go counter to the equality, dignity and rights of women. Since religion has an incomparable hold over the consciousness of people, its anti-feminist stance in any form is bound to strike deeper roots making the liberation of women a very difficult task.

Religious traditions admittedly contain also elements and doctrinal tenets that accord due place to woman. God is not only pictured as father, as male, but also as mother, female. These forgotten aspects need to be highlighted today as an important support to the movement of women's liberation.

However one should be on guard, so that these elements are not exploited to create a "feminine mystique"

in order to keep the women in the present social, economic and political condition of oppression with only lip service being paid to their nobility. Whenever women's liberation is spoken about, one is quick to recall those doctrines, instances and cases where the praises of womanhood are sung. Such praises on paper are flagrantly contradicted by the gruesome acts of inhumanity heaped upon women; the feminist movement is sceptic about their validity to change and transform the deep-rooted social condition of women.

In India the oppression of women is most severe. Cultures weigh heavily on them. Anyone who has observed the Singapore or Malaysian society, cannot but notice how the women of Indian stock are in general much more diffident and dependent than their Chinese counterparts, though the Chinese traditional culture has been equally discriminatory against women. Traditional culture is a powerful factor in women's oppression; but it does not explain everything. The traditional institutions like dowry are today being instrumentalized by the modern culture whose sole driving force seems to be money. Even the limited support and respect which women enjoyed in our traditional society is giving way today under the impact of a new 'culture' of consumerism turning women into a helpless state of insecurity and fear, and consigning them even to the fire. The situation of ever growing horrendous crimes against women forces itself on our conscience and calls for a Christian response.

The concerns, goals and priorities of these liberation movements of women in India and in the Third World at large cannot be the same as in the industrially advanced countries. Women in the Western world are fighting for equal opportunities in public life and professions. This does not necessarily call for a transformation of existing social structures. On the other hand, in India we have multitudes of women who go hungry and undernourished because, as women, they are under-paid in spite of long hours of heavy work, women here are bought and sold against their will in "marriage" and in flesh trade; women here

are driven to despair through social ostracization, wife-beating and numerous other forms of ill-treatment. The issues the movement in India have to grapple with are then more serious, fundamental and challenging. This situation calls for a change in the entire social system, myths, values and attitudes in the very structure of thought and language. It is here that theology could play a vital role.

The issues of women and their emancipation should be an important dimension in Indian theological reflection. And in this task we have a firm point of reference in the life, teachings, and attitudes of Jesus which stand in striking contrast to the Jewish tradition and the practice of his contemporaries. They furnish principles and criteria for a critique on some of our Indian traditions as well as some deviations in the course of Christian history. Our theological reflection and critique born of the concrete experience of injustice and oppression should reach the roots. We can, for instance, ask whether certain things attributed to the nature of women are really so, or whether they are not simply a matter of deep-rooted social customs, habituated ways of thinking. We can note a certain parallel in the justification of the system of slavery for millennia. It was taken for granted and as certain that some are born free and others are by nature slaves who should have their joy and fulfilment in obeying the masters and being loyal to them. Biblical message of creation cannot allow any consideration of woman as belonging to an inferior order by nature or looking upon woman, as Aristotle maintained, as a male manqué — an opinion endorsed even by St. Thomas Aquinas. The male-female relation should be on the basis of equality and mutual complementarity, in love and partnership. A genuine theological vision on the place of woman and her vocation should confront the host of evils which women are subjected to.

One of the serious obstacles in the way of women's liberation is the low-image which they have of themselves, an image very often created by men for them — an image which they have internalized. It is this which makes even women, to consider other women as inferior, thus women

becoming the "intimate enemy" of their own cause.

The complementarity of man and woman should always be kept in mind in any effort for woman's liberation. If woman sometimes tends to act as man, the fault lies basically with the whole society which has kept women inferior. But women have an inalienable place and role and their liberation cannot mean an exchange of their complementary role in return for a psuedo-identity. This remark is not meant in any way to support the domestication of women or to reinforce in a subtle way their present social position and roles.

A specifically Indian theological reflection needs to be developed in support of the emerging initiatives for the liberation of Indian women. At this juncture we cannot but refer to the fifty thousand strong militia of Indian women religious who have dedicated their life and all for the Kingdom of God. Though as women, they too are discriminated against, they should feel challenged by even the more appalling situation of women in the world, specially those belonging to the poorest sections of the society, those living in the rural areas towards whom the women religious bear a Christian responsibility. From their concrete involvement for the cause of the women and their solidarity with their condition, the women-religious could help to evolve a very fruitful Indian feminist theological perspective. It is a task no male theologian can venture to do adequately.

The aim of this number is not to present a comprehensive or exhaustive picture of the issues of women, their oppression and liberation. The articles are like flashes which highlight one or other aspect of the question. Together they constitute an invitation to the readers to turn their minds in all seriousness to the questions affecting women in India, analyse and understand them in the socio-cultural and religious context and contribute through committed action to the emancipation of the daughters of Eve who are none other than our mothers and sisters.

# Why this Oppression of Women?

## Introduction

In the context of the Church in India today, as well as outside its portals, a serious effort is being made in certain circles to engage in societal analysis. Though this effort is sometimes Christian-inspired, we find marxist tools of analysis being employed.

However in courses and discussions on people's development (except those organized by women who are "aware") hardly any attempt is made to understand the fact that societies the world over, by and large, are patriarchal. The implications of patriarchy in India for women have not been understood or analysed except by a few women (most of them outside Church-circles). Neither does there seem to be any serious will to do so<sup>1</sup>. Yet, the plight of women-victims of violence is sometimes lamented and more frequently reported now than before in the papers. These violences against women are but symptoms of a deeper malaise in society which is consciously committed to the subordination of women.

The process of socialization of our children into the existing male-dominated society is so complete that questions are seldom raised about the impact of patriarchy on girls and women. Not only men but most women find nothing defective with the man-woman relationship of domination and subordination that they will argue for the

1. Recently at a meeting of developmental personnel in Delhi, a participant from Germany expressed surprise that there was laughter when Women's issues were raised. "I had not expected laughter from this group" he said.

status quo or say that "there is nothing wrong, our women are O.K., we have even produced an Indira Gandhi".

### Patriarchy

In ancient civilizations (Egypt, Mesopotamia etc.) female divinities ruled the heavens and hell. But gradually patriarchal cultures with their male gods (Mary Daly asserts "God was represented as man, hence men began to consider themselves as gods")<sup>2</sup> have reigned supreme ideologically for over 5000 years. This transition from matriarchy to patriarchy is considered by Fredrick Engels "as the great historical defeat of the feminine sex".

Thus written history has been, as feminists have discovered, "his story" and not "her story"<sup>3</sup>. It is the story of conqueror man, woman victim or slave. Hence the aggressive behaviour of men towards women is condoned and justified; in fact men believe they have a right over all women — particularly over their bodies. This has resulted in the misuse of women — physically, emotionally, sexually, mentally, and spiritually. This is typical of the behaviour of the conqueror towards the conquered !

Feminism further recognizes that sexism — namely those patterns and behaviours, those systems and structures which reflect and reinforce the unequal status of women and men — is one expression — possibly the primary expression — of the patterns of domination which control our world. Sexism, racism, classism, militarism, neo-colonialism and ecological destruction are rooted in the same system which requires that one person or group be subordinated to another — a system presently functioning to maintain male supremacy. We call this system *patriarchy*.<sup>4</sup>

2. Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father. Towards a Philosophy of Women's Liberation*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1973.

3. Jessie Tellis - Nayak, *Indian-Womanhood: There and Now, Situation, Efforts, Profiles*, Indore: Satprakshan Sanchar Kendra, 1983, chapters 2 and 3

4. Mary Riley O.P., *Women, Carriers of a New Vision*, occasional papers, Washington D.C.. Centre for Concern. 1984, page 3.

What has patriarchy done to women and girls? How has it maintained the system of inequality? One of the methods and techniques it has used is global patriarchal violence to women.

Susan Brownmiller's book: *Against Our Will*<sup>5</sup> gives a broad spectrum of how rape is used to subjugate woman and to get back at her by man whose property she is considered to be — be it father, husband or son. But the question that kept nagging my mind was this: Men not only rape women but also often inflict deep wounds on the victims, mutilate their sexual organs, dis-member them and murder them brutally. Why this deep hostility of men against women?

Mary Daly's book: *Gyn/Ecology* provides us with some understanding of this phenomenon<sup>6</sup>. This book though it shakes the very foundations of Christianity and is too painful and difficult for many women to read, provides many insights into patriarchy.

In this book the author shows how the subordination of women has been practised on a large scale in different patriarchal cultures, India, China, Africa, Europe and America causing untold suffering to millions of women, thus succeeding in keeping them in a less favoured position.

In India, she analyses the practice of Sati which she terms (ironically) as "the ultimate consummation of marriage". In sati, woman having completely internalized the expectation about her as a widow walks to the husband's funeral pyre to immolate herself.

She has seen the fate of other widows. She is about to become a drudge, a slave, starved, tyrannized over, abused — and this is the sacred way out — "following the divine law", committing a pious and meritorious act, in spite of all foreign made interdicts, she escapes

5. Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will - Men, Women and Rape*, New York: Penguin, 1976.

6. Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*, London: The Women's press, Fourth Edition, 1981.

a present hell and may hope for a happier birth in the next incarnation.<sup>17</sup>

If she displays a love of life or of children and shows reluctance to do so, she is dragged to commit this type of suicide.

Kamaladevi Chottopadhyay in her book *Indian Woman's Battle for Freedom*<sup>8</sup> says that it was the brahmin priests who insisted that this practice be carried on. These same brahmins abandoned their orthodoxy during the British period to join the bureaucracy to enjoy its benefits. But they insisted that "Sati" be practised since they were not the victims. This she terms as "real devilry", particularly since it was done in the name of religion.

In China for over 1000 years footbinding was inflicted on girls first of the higher classes, then it spread downward. Footbinding meant mutilating the girl's feet, crushing the bones and binding them to prevent them from growing. The pain to the girl was unimaginable! It was done to restrict the movement of girls and women and thus control them. But the ideology propagated was that the leg stumps as a result of footbinding would be sexually attractive to men. They were termed as the "lotus hooks" or "golden hooks". This ideology prevailed and was so well believed in by the women of the household, that otherwise it would be impossible to get the girls married. Could slavery to man's thinking and demands go further?

Female Genital Mutilation in Africa is prevalent even today<sup>9</sup>. It is claimed that over 85 million women and girls suffer from this atrocity. This is to control the women and deprive them of sexual pleasure. Performed by untrained women under pressure from family members, it is not

7. Mayo, Katherine, *Mother India*, p. 83. quoted by Mary Daly p. 127

8. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, *Indian Woman's Battle for Freedom*, New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1983.

9. Fran P. Hosken, *The Hosken Report-Genital and Sexual Mutilation of Females*, Lexington, WIN NEWS, (Third Edition 1983); Anna Varced Alexander, *Female Genital Mutilation*, Mangalore: WINA, 1986.

only psychologically traumatic but extremely painful when sensitive parts are clipped off. This results in many complications and health hazards and makes child-bearing a horrible experience. This is termed female circumcision but is not as simple as male circumcision. Here is a vivid description of it.

The operation was done without any anesthetic, with no regard for hygiene or precautions of any sort. With the broken neck of a bottle, the old woman banged hard down, cutting into the upper part of my friend's genital so as to make as wide a cut as possible, since an incomplete excision does not constitute a sufficient guarantee against profligacy in girls.

The blunt glass of the bottle did not cut deeply enough into my friend's genitals and the exciseuse had to do it several more times. ... When the clitoris had been ripped out, the women howled with joy, and forced my friend to get up despite a streaming hemorrhage to parade her through the town<sup>10</sup>.

The demand by women that this practice be abolished by the United Nations has not only been met with protest from men but they went to the extent of pleading the institutionalization of this unspeakable atrocity !

The white race with its "superiority complex" has not been free of its own type of barbarism, on a large scale, against women. Europe too has had its darkest hours for women in its witch hunts. Research on witch hunting shows that thousands of women were hunted and burnt at the stakes, because famine and pestilence in the society were attributed to them. They were accused of consorting with the devil and bringing evil into the world. It is estimated that over a million women became scapegoats of a male-dominated christian culture.

Feminists have however discovered that many of these women were strong like Joan of Arc who possessed great powers, sometimes of healing ailments and did not come under the control of men.

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10. Quoted in Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology*, p: 163

The superior learning of witches was recognized in the widely extended belief of their ability to work miracles. The witch was in reality the profoundest thinker, the most advanced scientist of those ages.. As knowledge has ever been power, the church feared its use in woman's hands, and leveled its deadliest blows at her<sup>11</sup>.

### Indian experience

From the foregoing one can conclude that large scale violence against women has existed and still exists in patriarchal societies — the variety and the techniques vary but the underlying ideology and philosophy are the same — the superiority of man and the inferiority of woman. These are propagated by every instrument in society including women.

That this exists in present day Indian society is too well known. The set of slides called *Manushi* prepared by Caritas India are a reflection of what has been recorded in the Indian newspapers and magazines<sup>12</sup>. Yet one realizes that what appears in the papers is less than the proverbial "tip of the iceberg". The phenomenon confronts and plagues girls and women from conception to death. To mention only a few.

— Foeticide or the destruction of the unborn female foetus quite prevalent today among those who can afford to test the sex of a child.

— Infanticide of girl babies is known not only in rare groups of Tamil Nadu, but is widely practised secretly in many communities of North India.

— Neglect of nutrition and medical care for girls.

— The perpetual assault on the development of the girl throughout her socialization to make of her a non-person — always to accept subordination to man in all stages of her life. Eve teasing, wife beating, rape in marriage and outside, prostitution and dowry

11. Quoted in Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology*, p. 217

12. A set of slides called *Manushi*, available with Caritas India, C.B.C.I. Centre, Golda Khanna, New Delhi - 110 001.

deaths. No where in the world are wives burnt to death for the sake of goods!

The list is endless. All kinds of injustices and discrimination are built into our legal system. Many laws favourable to women are never implemented.

Most societies in India today are patriarchal or male-dominated. They continue to exist and thrive by using all the tools in their possession namely religion, home, schools, textbooks, legal system, mass media and even women themselves (who have internalized society's values) to reinforce and continue woman's subjugation and maintenance of a second class citizenship. Even the words "woman" and "feminist" do not connote beings endowed with human dignity.

### Patriarchal Religions

To the dismay of many women thinkers and concerned men, it is now realized that religion — all religions since 3000 B.C. — have legitimized the subordination of women through their ideologies and philosophies. Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, Confucianism, Buddhism, Jainism, Christianity and Islam are all patriarchal.

The golden age when women could devote themselves to learning along with the men found no echo when Manu the Hindu Lawgiver ordained that woman must be subject to the father, husband and son during various phases of her life.

Woman's most important role was to be a wife and mother. She was to attain salvation at the feet of her husband. In other words she was not considered a person in her own right. Though considered impure, she had to pray and fast and perform special *vratas* for long life and protection of her husband and sons. A widow was inauspicious and a misfortune but not a widower.

However even in modern times Hinduism resorts to worship of the goddesses who are loved but feared. They represent wealth, wisdom, learning and creative power.

Buddhism and Jainism though begun as protest movements within Hinduism continue to limit the role of

woman to wife and mother. However, they did offer to women an alternative to marriage as religious celibate women but here too they were assigned a status lower to that of the monk.

Zoroastrianism the religion of the Parsees gave a place of honour to women but menstruation which is sometimes accompanied by pain was considered unwholesome. Women were not permitted to participate in religious ceremonies during this period. Married priests had to segregate their women during menstruation. When a Parsee male marries a non-Parsee, she can be a part of their fold but if a Parsee woman does the same she is not even allowed to enter the fire temple. Thus with its progressive outlook, it is no different from other patriarchal religions which discriminate against women.

In theory, the Koran regards men and women as equals. During the time of its origin it gave women rights that made them above women of other religions. But interpreters of the Koran have imposed 'injunctions' over the centuries which account for woman's present low status.

The priesthood is denied to women, she has no place in formal religious and legal affairs. Worst of all the marriage contract provides man with the unilateral right to divorce and permits polygamy.

Recently in India a court judgement in favour of a woman made the Muslim community mobilize itself to move the Indian Government to pass the Muslim Woman's Divorce Bill with indecent haste, pushing back women to the dark ages. This is patriarchy in operation<sup>13</sup>.

Christians in India were always made to understand that their religion championed the cause of women. But women today find to their great chagrin that this is far from the truth.

Though Christ was explicit that "I have come that

13. The Shah Bano case, where an old woman sued her lawyer husband for maintenance and got it. This resulted in great pressure being brought to bear upon her by religious leaders, subsequently she wished the judgement to be nullified.

all may have life and have it to the full" (John 10:10), the discipleship of equals which marked the early church does not exist today. It got lost by the influence of Judaic traditions, Greek philosophies and incorporation of Roman hierachal structures.

Christians in India in spite of their superior educational background compared to Indian Muslims, have not reacted positively to the supreme court judgement given in the case of Mary Roy versus the State of Kerala and the Union of India. Though the judgement was a victory for women after a heroic struggle, the law minister of Kerala K.M. Mani himself along with the Churches is mobilizing the Christians to fight against this judgement.

Through the Travancore and Cochin Succession Acts numerous women were rendered homeless and destitute, yet the church did not call a halt to this grave injustice because it did not affect patriarchy; in fact, it was in line with its thinking. But today the "bogey of destroying the Syrian Christian family and the destruction of the community is raised to rouse public opinion against the retrospective implementation of the judgement"<sup>14</sup>.

Says a Christian woman:

"Actually, it would do the Syrian Christians a lot of good to be economically destroyed. May be they would then turn attention toward becoming better Christians."<sup>15</sup>

### Negative role of religion

It is clear to us now that sexist ideology and culture are an integral part of patriarchal religions. Their purpose is to make women creatures of biological destiny<sup>16</sup>. This is connected not only with women's reproductive role and functions but also with her work in the household and society.

14. See *On Legal Bondage*, Bangalore: WINA, 1985.

15. From a letter of Mary Roy to the writer.

16. Rosemary Radford Reuther, *Disputed Questions: On Being a Christian*, Journeys in Faith Series, Robert A. Raines, Editor, Nashville: Abingdon, 1982.

Christian women and scholars are now discovering the reasons why women have been excluded in patriarchal religions from participation in theological education.

Pandita Ramabai, India's most illustrious Christian woman, tells us how her father a great pundit taught his wife Sanskrit. For this reason he was ostracised by other Pundits. But before an assembly of pundits in South Kanara he was able to prove from authentic Hindu Scriptures that women are not forbidden to study the sacred language and books.

It was later that her mother taught Ramabai the Hindu Scripture. In later life she won the title of Pundita from the Calcutta University senate. This brilliant and talented woman of the last century broke many patriarchal traditions. She became a Christian, travelled in Europe and America to prepare herself thoroughly for the vital role she played in India in rescuing brahmin widows and rehabilitating them. In addition, she was a great thinker much ahead of her times. Her knowledge of Sanskrit facilitated her translation of the Bible into Marati from the original Hebrew and Greek<sup>17</sup>.

Deprivation of women from theological education means excluding them from being shapers of public culture and confining them to a passive and secondary role. It also means that public theological culture is defined by men not only in the absence of women but against women<sup>18</sup>.

Examples of these are plentiful in patriarchal religions. Here are two citations from Christian writers<sup>19</sup>.

Woman! you are the Devil's doorway. You have led astray one whom the Devil would not dare attack directly. It is your fault that the Son of God had to die; you should always go in mourning and rags. (Tertullian)

17. Padmini Sengupta, *Pandita Ramabai Saraswati: Her Life and Work*, Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1970.

18. Rosemary Radford Reuther, p. 120

19. Mary Riley, *Eve and Mary the Mother are Our Stem, All our Centuries go back to them*, Occasional Papers, Washington D.C.: Centre of Concern, 1984.

## Why this Oppression of Women? 19

Woman is an occasional and incomplete being ... a misbegotten male. It is unchallengeable that woman is destined to live under man's influence and has no authority from her Lord. (Thomas Aquinas)

Thus we see that sexism is promoted and sanctioned in all patriarchal religions. Women have been kept away from learning and speaking; those women who develop are ignored or co-opted into silence.

The male bias and domination run through every aspect of tradition — from Old to the New Testament, Talmud, Church fathers, Canon law, Reformation, Enlightenment and modern theology. It is an integral part of what has been received as mainstream, normative traditions.

But due to the efforts of Biblical feminist scholars it is discovered that women in first century Judaism were not uniformly excluded from study. Also the teachings of Timothy about women keeping silent now appears, not as a common practice but as a reaction against their widespread participation in leadership, teaching and ministry in the first generation of Christianity<sup>20</sup>. If Christianity founded by Christ wants truth and justice to prevail, the wrong done to women will have to be recognized<sup>21</sup>. There are hopeful signs to show that Christianity has made a start. Will this phenomenon live or will it be squashed to death? This is a question which the people of God have to reflect.

To liberate woman from the subordinate role assigned by anti-feminist religious ideologies and cultures, all men and women of good-will have to look at these religions critically, weigh their consequences on women in particular and on society in general, admit the wrongs and begin to

20. Rosemary Redford Reuther, p. 123.

21. The rest of this paper follows much of the thoughts expressed by the writer and Stella Faria, in a paper prepared for the F.A.B.C. meeting in Tokyo (Sept. 1986), Titled "Towards a New Understanding of Women's Role" the paper formed the basis for a discussion group and the role of women in society and the church.

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set them right. For women realize that: Sexism is not the problem of women alone but of the entire human race and particularly of its religious leaders who have consciously (perhaps) let it thrive.

But one must admit that in spite of a liberated and secularized world where the role of women is being increasingly recognized, it will take quite a time for anti-feminism of religions and cultures, to vanish. Yet a beginning has to be made.

### Acknowledge the wrong

Pope John XXIII with his vision of a Church in dialogue with the world, urged the people of God to read the signs of the times and to take account of the aspirations of women to personhood (humanhood). This is no easy task when an analysis of the woman's condition is understood and the need for change is accepted. The task is impossible if those who are in power and privileged positions fail to grasp the situation or do not bear the goodwill to reverse the trend of the deteriorating condition of women and girls in the world in general and the Indian sub-continent in particular.

Fr. Zeitler, in a paper prepared for the meeting of Christian women theologians in Bangalore in November 1984 asserted that all this calls the church to undertake a cleansing process<sup>22</sup>.

Purification means that we have to raise some very fundamental questions and try to answer them honestly. Rethinking of some vital parts of Christian theology is required though it may be extremely painful but in the long run, it will be worth the cost.

The Holy Scriptures were written by men when patriarchy reigned supreme. It was therefore inevitable

22. Several of the ideas here are taken from Fr. Englebert Zaitler SVD *Woman in Catholic Theology*, a paper prepared for the National Consultation "Theology for Humanhood" Bangalore, 1984. Now available in the published report.

that patriarchal ideas, styles and cultures formed its context. It is therefore our responsibility to go through Christian writings, dogmas and ideas till we reach firm ground on which a Christian theology on women can be built. Zeitler warns that one must be careful in drinking the waters of "revelation" which are contaminated by man's sewage waters. One would have to 'soar' to great heights to seek the purity of God's revelations.

To the great credit of the Catholic church after Vatican II, it has publicly confessed several mistakes of the past. This action was initiated by the Holy Father himself.

To enumerate a few:

- The Pope kissed the rock of Galilee to make atonement for the slaughter of 6 million Jews by their Christian brethren.
- He embraced the Archbishop of Constantinople, the two main Christian Churches had ex-communicated each other.

Only one big group, the biggest of all, has not been asked for pardon and forgiveness — the women — this in spite of the atrocities women have suffered theologically, socially and physically for centuries.

In addition, in order to solve the "women's problem in the Church" a thorough purification is required — not merely on the intellectual level but on a deep psychological and emotional level to remove the blocks to the women's question.

Can this be done? Will the church leaders of India have enough courage to initiate this process within the Catholic church? Women put their firm faith in the Holy Spirit who will guide them and will give them the strength they need!

Yet it must be reiterated that working within the context of the Catholic Church alone is not sufficient. All religions have "committed grave errors" against one half of humankind. Christian Churches could give the lead, if need be, to enable Judaism, Hinduism, Islam and other

world religions to realise that they have "erred against women". This would be one task of evangelization in India — cleaning patriarchal society of its "biases against women".

But to achieve this, all patriarchal religions must join hands and acknowledge the wrongs said and done against women and try to make amends — just as Gandhiji acknowledged the discriminations against the "untouchables" in India and enabled the Indian nation through its leaders, to make concerted efforts not only to undo the wrongs but even to give them special treatment to compensate for the injustices done to them for centuries. The attempt though far from complete, has been genuine. With Christ working through the Holy Spirit this and more will be possible!

To build a better world men and women must accept that they are partners in the stupendous task given to both: to complete God's work on earth!

Mangalore

Jessie Tellis Nayak

# **Women's Rights and Reproductive Technologies**

## **Maternal mortality**

Traditional society in many parts of the world, notably in India, treated woman as a burdensome appendage. In spite of her dual contribution of household work and childbearing, often together with toil in the farm, she was considered an economic liability. As she seemed destined to crush the family with marriage and dowry expenses, she was regarded with neglect from birth. The arrival of a baby girl was often heralded with gloom as opposed to the exuberant joy at the birth of a male child.

In spite of the greater biological strength of the woman, the sex ratio in India declined from 972 females per 1,000 in 1901 to 931 in 1981. This is an index of the relative neglect of female children. While a woman belonging to the reproductive age ought to have a haemoglobin count of 14 grams to be able to retain an average standard of health for child delivery, many Indian women have a count of only 11 to 12 grams, and even less among those below the poverty line. This implies an anaemic condition with consequent damage to both mother and child. The girl child tends to be neglected by the family in various ways.

Babies also suffer from undernourishment and anaemia of the mother resulting in prematurity and prenatal mortality. Trained attendance at deliveries cannot prevent more than 25% of the cases. According to Krishna Menon and P.K. Devi: "For bringing about further reduction the desired change has to be in the area of social obste-

trics"<sup>1</sup>. Effective obstetrics is not merely a matter of medical skill, but of reform of societal attitudes towards poor women.

### **Return of female infanticide**

Misogyny or man's inhumanity to woman had its most cruel manifestation in the killing of unwanted female neonates by exposing or strangling. One would expect that such barbaric activities would not find any place in modern life. However, reports like the recent cover story in *India Today* should awaken one from any complacency<sup>2</sup>. The evil seems to have been aggravated in some places. According to the report, an estimated 6,000 female babies have been poisoned to death in the last decade just in the Usilampatti Kallar community of Tamilnadu. Many families there have increasingly come to accept it as the only way out of the crushing dowry problem. It is reported that 600 female births in the Kallar group are recorded in the Usilampatti government hospital every year, and out of them, about 570 vanish with their mothers soon after birth, and of these 450 are said to become victims of infanticide<sup>3</sup>.

That female life is expendable is confirmed by some data concerning deaths of women by 'accidents', particularly 'burns'. 34.2 per cent of accidental deaths in urban Maharashtra and 69.9 percent of those in Greater Bombay were reported to be due to 'burns'. Between the ages of 15 to 44, (very revealing figures), 24.7 per cent of total deaths of women in urban Maharashtra and 24.6 per cent in Greater Bombay were supposed to be by 'accidents'; of these 18.9 per cent and 19.3 per cent respectively were reported to be by 'burns'<sup>4</sup>. Such high incidence could not be brushed off saying that they might have been caused by kerosene stoves or nylon sarees.

1. Quoted *ibid.*

2. "Born to Die", June 15, 1986, pp. 26-31; See also Siella Faria, "Stop this Slaughter of Innocents", *The New Leader*, July 6, 1986, p. 10; Christine Krishnasami, "Extermination of Females", *ibid.*, 20 July 1986.

3. *India Today*, art. cit., p. 29.

4. See Malini Karkal, "How the Other Half Dies in Bombay", *Economic and Political Weekly*, August 24, 1985, p. 1424.

### **Amniocentesis and female foeticide**

Amniocentesis was first introduced as a diagnostic procedure to detect genetic abnormalities in the foetus with a view to possible treatment. It is done at 14th to 18th week of pregnancy, by inserting a needle into the amniotic sac and withdrawing some of the amniotic fluid in which the foetus is suspended. By a chromosomal study of the foetal cells present in the amniotic fluid, abnormalities may be detected.

However, soon it was discovered that amniocentesis could also be used to determine the sex of the unborn child. Because of the socio-cultural bias in India, some were quick to propose the method for eliminating 'unwanted' daughters even before they were born<sup>5</sup>. Now what are called 'sex determination clinics' have mushroomed in every city and town. If they lack their own facility for analysis of the sample, this is sent to bigger centres. The 'treatment' for those who have already one or more female is now available at a relatively cheap rate so that the evil will sweep the country unless vigorous attempts are made to control it. Already there is talk of legal ban against sex determination with a view to female foeticide. However, no legal steps would be of much help unless there is also a vast movement to attack the underlying causes of such a colossal discriminatory crime. It should be noted that these sex determination tests of themselves in no way guarantee the birth of a male child.

It is estimated that 22% of maternal deaths in India are due to abortion. How will Indian women, asks Bharati Sadasivan, 70% of whom are anaemic, bear the multiple hazards of repeated abortions until a son is at last born ?<sup>6</sup> Further, it is well known that abortion affects the chances of child bearing because of secondary sterility resulting from infection of the reproductive tract. The anxious search for a male child will often prove elusive, only leaving

5. See Bharati Sadasivam, "The Silent Scream", *The Illustrated Weekly of India*, September 14, 1986, pp. 38-41.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 39.

behind a trail of misery for the exhausted mother. Some cynical people might say that female foeticide would be an effective means of family planning as the number of women, who alone can bear children, will become less. Such talk is a gross violation of women's dignity and right to life.

Some may be inclined to hope that the serious imbalance between the sexes brought on by a widespread adoption of amniocentesis for female foeticide will ultimately make women more valuable because of their scarcity so that dowry will start flowing in the reverse direction. In fact, however, the status of women has not improved even though for decades the sex ratio has been unfavourable to them. Further imbalance in the sex ratio may only lead to increased rape and abduction. Men may start violent infighting to capture women looked upon as a scarce commodity.

### **Other forms of sex determination**

Last August, when the birth of India's first proven test-tube baby in Bombay was announced, the newspapers also reported the birth of the world's first 'sex-selected' test-tube baby in New Orleans. If in-vitro fertilization spreads in India, we may well expect a clamour for sex-selected test-tube babies. From the experience of the gross abuse of amniocentesis, there is little reason to doubt this.

In-vitro fertilization within the marriage relationship in itself need not altogether be ruled out from the moral point of view<sup>7</sup>. It is generally done because the sperm and the ovum cannot meet because of blocked or damaged fallopian tubes. The sperm are obtained through self-stimulation which in the context is not equivalent to masturbation in the moral sense. The subsequent artificial insemination departs, it is true, from the normal way of conception through the marital act. However, it seems to be justified when there is no other way of realizing the procreative end of marriage and of preserving the marriage

7. See my article, "Test Tube Babies", in *Moral and Pastoral Questions*, Anand, Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1985, ch. 18,

union from undue strain on account of childlessness.

If the artificial insemination was achieved through sperm obtained from a third party, there would be an unacceptable dissociation between procreation and married love, with many other legal and psychological problems.

The introduction of 'hired wombs' and 'surrogate motherhood' would lead to the exploitation of women, especially the poor. Such new reproductive technologies, while they may seem to offer exciting new 'choices' would pose a grave threat to the dignity of women who would be manipulated by unscrupulous technologists and middle men for the sake of some gain. Here it is not only a question of the *kind of choices* which are made, but also the *very motivation to choose*.

### **Abortion and feminism**

The so-called 'pro-choice' feminists claim that abortion rights are essential for women's full development and social equality. They insist that unrestricted abortion rights are part of women's rights to complete reproductive freedom.

Their views have been summarized well by Sidney Callaghan in terms of four central moral claims: 1) the moral right to control one's own body; 2) the moral necessity of autonomy in personal responsibility; 3) the moral claim regarding the contingent value of foetal life; 4) the moral right of women to true social equality<sup>8</sup>. We shall see that none of these claims justify abortion or conduce to the true welfare of women.

1) The moral right to control one's body does not mean that one has the right to destroy another's right to life, even though it may appear as a 'biological parasite'. Pregnancy is not like a cancer growth, but the way in which every human being enters the world. There was a time when women or slaves were considered too underdeveloped to merit human rights. As the most recent immi-

<sup>8</sup>. "Abortion and the Sexual Agenda", *Commonweal*, April 25, 1986 p. 232.

grants from non-personhood, it ill behoves pro-choice feminists to deny the right to life to an unborn baby because of underdevelopment or helplessness. One should also remember that half the foetuses are unborn females.

2) Personal responsibility is not arbitrary behaviour. The extreme need and dependency of the foetus only calls for the accepting of burdens, at times rather heavy.

3) The human foetus has intrinsic rights which the mother is called upon to respect so that she may herself maintain her true human dignity.

4) Pitting women against their unborn offspring is no way of promoting equality. As Callahan puts it: "Women will never cling to equality and social empowerment over mounds of dead foetuses."<sup>9</sup> Women yielding to abortion would only confirm the socio-cultural bias which is at the base of most abortion conflicts. It is because of the double standard of morality which discriminates against females in the matter of judging pre-marital and extra-marital intercourse that so many are led to contemplate abortion as the only way out. Similarly, it is because women have to bear the brunt of child rearing that they may be inclined to get rid of the foetus when she thinks that she would be unable to bring up the child. Such double standards should be vigorously combated.

Women then must claim the real right to decide for life, especially of their offspring, and society must support this right. Massive abortion in the name of women's privacy and reproductive freedom is to thrust all the moral responsibility on her amidst an iniquitous social system. Childbirth must be seen, not as a painful traumatic experience, but as the normal exercise of life-giving power which needs to be respected especially by male society.

#### **Hormonal method of contraception**

The so-called birth control Pill is normally to be taken from the 5th to the 25th day of each female cycle. Because of the obvious inconvenience and possibility of error in

9. Art. cit., p. 236.

taking the drug, a search has been going on for longer acting contraceptives. Recently, injectable contraceptives (ICs) with hormones have been introduced for the woman. The more common among these are called by the brand names of Depo-Provera and NET OEN.

Multinational companies always eager to make a fast buck at the cost of poor people, have been vigorously pushing such ICs in Third World countries. As B. Ekbal points out, "Depo-Provera, an injectable contraceptive banned in America for its potential for causing cancer and birth defects is being pushed into millions of women in mostly poor countries including Bangladesh and Pakistan by some international companies"<sup>10</sup>.

Now it is known that the U.S. multinational Upjohn Company had suppressed vital data on animal trials which indicated that the drug might be carcinogenic and hazardous<sup>11</sup>. In India too, results of field trials of ICs were suppressed. After consistent efforts by health groups and women's organizations, some information has come to light: The Indian Women Scientists Association has stated that neither Depo-Provera nor NET OEN is "feasible, acceptable or safe" in a mass programme in India.

The reasons are: 1) the enormous potential for misuse of the ICs; 2) experience of exploitative use on disadvantaged women in other countries; 3) weakness of present health system unable to cope with routine problems of health care and hence totally incapable of handling the selection and care of women submitted to the treatment. It would not at all be possible to conduct, in overcrowded and understaffed family planning centres, pre-examination to eliminate contra-indications; 4) excessive emphasis since 1977 on female contraception because of political reasons, and more so because of patriarchy and social inequality.

10. "The Indian Drug Industry and the People's Needs", *Medical Service*, 42 (1985), N. 29, p. 19. The same has been more fully explained by Amitava Guha, "Need for a Rational Drug Policy", *ibid.*, p. 19.

11. Cf. Padma Prakash, "Hormonal Methods of Contraception", *Economic and Political Weekly*, April 24, 1986, pp. 733-734.

Little is known about how the drug is metabolized in the body or whether the active ingredients accumulate over a period of time to the detriment of the health of the woman. The varied menstrual problems<sup>12</sup> that arise even over a limited time can hardly be termed 'side effects' since the drug directly affects the ovarian and menstrual areas of the reproductive system. The other effects such as headache, breast tenderness and weakness may not be without connection with the disturbance in the reproductive system. Decreased libido cannot be dismissed by saying that it is not of great importance for the woman. It would manifest an attitude of gross discrimination against women.

If the woman is less than two weeks pregnant while starting the treatment, the pregnancy would go undetected and the active ingredient of the synthetic hormone ingested by the mother may harm the foetus. If the pregnancy arose due to the failure of the ICs, the matter would be more serious as the foetus would be exposed to its harmful effect for a longer time. Moreover, as the active ingredient is secreted in breast milk, women who are on ICs and have continued to breast feed the infant are exposing the latter to the deleterious effect of the drug. The mothers would later have to bear the brunt of caring for defective offspring.

Some points should be specially noted in the matter of ICs: 1) the practice of setting targets and quotas and then trying to achieve them through 'camps' and incentives, if not coercive means, are likely to lead to grave abuses; 2) The practice of testing drugs on deprived sections of society needs to be abandoned forthwith. The nefarious activities of multinational companies should be effectively curbed; 3) There should be a review and tightening of drug laws, especially those pertaining to clinical trials; 4) The aggressive marketing and advertising of family planning methods, especially those with grave health

12. See Sujit K. Das and Pijus Kanti Sarkar, "Case for Injectable Contraceptives"?, *ibid.*, October 5, 1985, p. 1713.

hazards should be controlled; 5) Partly because of the political consequences of male vasectomy offending the male ego, and partly because of the exaggerated and tendentious propaganda of the parties that were determined to come to power in 1977, there has been a dramatic shift towards female contraception, whether surgical or chemical. This is a grave injustice to women; 6) The activities of the pharmaceutical lobby, largely controlled by multinationals, pressurising government to license harmful drugs or contraceptives should be exposed. Poor people must not be allowed to be treated as guinea pigs or sources of ill-gotten profits.

### Conclusion

Some of the new technologies for preventing the birth of unwanted female children, like amniocentesis with foeticide, have created a sensation. However, such misuse of modern medical technology is but the manifestation of a deeper malaise, of the underlying negative and discriminatory attitudes towards women. Whatever be the cause of such attitudes, enlightened public opinion now recognizes them as irrational and damaging to human society as a whole. If man looks down upon woman who has been given to him as partner and without whom his life would be incomplete, then man himself suffers a deep loss within himself. Hence males should see that misogyny in any form is against their own deepest interests.

In order to prevent concrete abuses of the old and new kind, it is urgent to change these negative attitudes. Women themselves, and not only a few feminists, must be at the forefront of the effort to bring about the change. This may be difficult because of the socio.cultural conditioning through which the negative attitudes have been internalized by a large section of women. Still, the occasional storms of protest at some particularly shocking innovation, and more so the rise in the general level of education, however unsatisfactory this may be, gives hope that a change is possible.

All those who are engaged in the liberation movement must become aware that one of the main aspects of the evil structure in contemporary society is discrimination against women. Thereby, half of humanity is kept in a state of bondage and oppression that often leads to brutal suppression of life itself. Hence the liberation and advancement of women must be understood as an integral and crucial area of total social liberation.

Some evils like that of dowry need special attention. The aggravation of the evil in recent years seems to be part of the general tendency towards material aggrandisement whereby the happiness of individual persons is made subservient to material advantage. Even parents seem to be more bothered about dowry transactions than the happiness of their children. There is need for stressing the importance of human values and rights over any material consideration.

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# On Language and Sexism

"Human rights have no gender." (Hedwig Dohm)

Language encompasses us and permeates our psyche. It influences our thought processes and is a sine qua non for communication. It is a most powerful tool. It shapes our images, our behaviour patterns, attitudes and relationships, though we may not be aware of its influence in our lives. As Lakoff succinctly puts it, "language uses us as much as we use language"<sup>1</sup>.

Language is a part of culture, and its medium, therefore its role in a child's socialization process — acculturation, presentation, transmission and transformation (in society) - is of vital importance. Why are we concerned about language? Primarily because we live, and are socialized in a society that is patriarchal, a society in which the standard for human beings is the *male*. It is presumed that 'man' includes 'woman', but actually it does not. In fact, after *man* we say '*his*'. In a broad generalisation, there is less opportunity to observe the *particular* and hence the exclusion of *woman* goes unnoticed by both women and men. Hence we need to see how and why *language affects women*.

## Language - offshoot of the women's movement

One of the significant features of the feminist movement has been the ongoing analysis of and debate over the use of language by scholars. The impetus to the debate grew out of radical self-awareness that began in the '60s when feminist scholars questioned androcentric texts and found that (1) women were defined as the 'other' of man,

1. Robin Lakoff, *Language and Women's Place*, New York: Harper & Colophon Books, 1975, p. 3.

or of a male God, reducing them to objects of male scholarship<sup>2</sup>; (2) language subsumed women's identities, and thereby excluded them; (3) ordinary language is 'sexist' which makes it oppressive and 'morally objectionable'; and (4) language stereotypes women. Yet, it is true that "human relationships are in fact inter-individual structures whose common bond is language, and which actually exist at every moment of our history"<sup>3</sup>.

Writings of researchers on the philosophy of language endeavour to arrive at an understanding of the concept of masculine terms in neutral use which cause human beings to internalise male imagery from the moment they learn to *utter their first words*.

Eleanor Kuykendall<sup>4</sup> finds in the Extended Standard Theory (which is not in agreement with feminist linguistics) a linguistic paradigm of the "rational speaker who follows, unaware, the grammatical rules which linguists formulate explicitly". This ideal rational speaker, she says, is influenced by culture. Feminism, on the other hand, argues that there is a conflict between the cultural definitions of gender, and "the ideal of individual and autonomous perception and action, which also includes our speech acts". Further, it is interesting to note that differences exist in several languages between men's and women's speech, as evidenced in socio-linguistic studies. For our present purpose, however, it is important to understand the distinction between sexist and non-sexist language and the meaning of the former.

### **Sexism and sexist language**

The term 'sexist' is defined variously, though in its most basic sense it characterises anything that creates, constitutes, promotes or exploits irrelevant or important

2. Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, "Breaking the Silence - Becoming Visible", *Concilium 182*, Fiorenza & Collins, Edinburgh: T & T Clarke Ltd., Scotland, 1985, pp 3-16.

3. Eleanor Kuykendall, "Feminist Linguistics in Philosophy", in *Sexist Language - A Modern Philosophical Analysis*, ed. Mary Vetterling-Braggin New Jersey: 1981, p. 134

4. *Ibid* p. 132

marking of the distinctions between the sexes<sup>5</sup>. Sexist language is said to be 'part of sexism' which is fundamentally the discrimination and exploitation of women because of their sex.

Patrick Grim<sup>6</sup>, however, points out that it is difficult to define the term 'sexist'. According to him, "*sexist speech is ordinary speech with all its complexities gone sexist*"; a *philosophical understanding* of sexist speech would be easier, "if either it is capable of study in isolation, or if the philosophy of language could be applied to it second hand in particular". But, according to him neither of these is the case. Though he does not offer any particular definition, he outlines two sets of major approaches which elucidate the term 'sexist'. The first set of approaches, he calls, 'consequentialist', and the second 'propositional'.

(i) According to consequentialist approach "X is sexist only if it contributes to, encourages, causes or results in the oppression of women". Grim finds a number of 'glaring problems' with this definition "which is often proposed in response to a challenge for clarification". The 'casual or quasi-casual' terms referred to appear positively to invite counter examples. In fact, the term 'oppression' itself according to him calls for a further clarification.

Despite his criticism, he considers this definition from a consequentialist point of view. To him a consequentialist approach has much to say in its favour, in that it explains some applications of the term 'sexist', e.g., "sexist societies, sexist social institutions, and sexist actions of various types do variously encourage, contribute to, cause and result in oppression of women".

Grim notes that the consequentialist clearly shows what 'sexism' has to do with *consequences*, which are the reasons for its being *ethically objectionable*. There are factors like 'unrevealed' and 'unexpressed' beliefs which do not quite fit a consequentialist definition. He argues that an 'unexpressed' or 'unrevealed' attitude, might be as sexist

<sup>5</sup>. Marilyn Frye, "Male Chauvinism - A Conceptual Analysis" *ibid* p.8

<sup>6</sup>. Patrick Grim, "Sexist Speech: Two Basic Questions, *ibid* pp 34-42

as that expressed in action or speech, if the term 'sexist' is admitted to include unspoken and unrevealed non-existent beliefs and attitudes. And if we are "willing to accept 'sexist' claims or beliefs which no one holds", then the consequentialist definition of sexist is not adequate.

ii) Propositional approach, which Grim describes as a series of 'nested definitions' has a core definition which would "apply only to attitudes, beliefs, and things as sexist purely in terms of their content, what they are, belief, attitudes, or claims to the effect that".

Here Grim seems to propose that sexist claims, beliefs and attitudes, are distinguishable to the extent that they render women inferior 'because of or in virtue of their sex'. A wider application of 'sexist' to actions, social institutions and such others, is seen in terms of "appropriate ties or beliefs, attitudes and things said which are sexist in content". The actual belief or attitude may be sexist or likely to be sexist, in virtue of the belief held, and the action may be sexist in virtue of attitudes revealed or beliefs exhibited. The difficulty with this approach is that it is not always clear whether the definition or the 'ties' to belief involves "some imagined inferiority of women".

On the positive aspects of this definition, Grim tries to determine whether a particular action is, or is not sexist—one which makes us uncover its motives and attitudes, and see if they are in any way 'tied' to sexist beliefs and attitudes. In so doing, he notes the possibility, that one may be less inclined to label it 'sexist'.

A 'propositional' definition also serves to illustrate to some extent the ethics of 'sexism'. It also distinguishes attitudes or beliefs that are 'sexist' from non-sexist, merely on the basis of their content alone, without tracing consequences', as proposed by a rival consequentialist's account. Consequences apart, 'sexism', says Grim, 'is such a personal failing' because it is centrally linked to 'corrupt attitudes and distorted beliefs':

Thus we see that while actual oppression is central

to the consequentialist approach, the centrality of the propositional approach is "the content of sexist beliefs or things said (whether actually said or believed or not) dealing with sexist actions and institutions in terms of appropriate connections with sexist claims and beliefs".

As the scope of this paper is limited, the above merely touches the surface of the problem connected with language and sexism. However, in view of the nature of this paper, a rather superficial attempt is made to look at the language used in the Church.

### **Church and sexism**

Many forms of degrading discrimination still persist today in a great part of our society that affect and seriously harm particular categories of women.  
(John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, No. 24)

### **Church and patriarchy**

That sexism in its various forms exists in the Church, is an established fact. All major religions around 3000 BC and later, were patriarchal. Christianity was no exception! Judaism and Christianity found their roots in Aristotelian philosophy that was so concerned with social customs and economic functions, as it was about the nature of relationships between the 'natural ruler', and the 'natural subject'. According to Aristotle, "the male is by nature superior and the female inferior; one rules and the other is ruled - a principle which necessarily extends to all mankind. Those, therefore, who are much inferior to others as the body to the soul, are by nature slaves"<sup>7</sup>. Since only one person can be the head of the household, women became the property of free men and, therefore, their slaves.

In classical Judaism, there was no distinction between religion and the law, both of which were incorporated into a single legal code. This God-derived code was identified with natural law. Male leadership which was based on the universal natural order that imaged the 'Great Patriarch',

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7. John Warrington, ed, *Politics - The Athenian Constitution*, London Heron Books: By arrangement with J.M. Dent & Son Ltd., 1959, Bk. I, p. 11.

was said to come from God. Hence, patriarchy considered to be the reflection of the image of God, projects man as God's representative. "Therefore, metaphors used to express theological insights were overwhelmingly male oriented."<sup>8</sup>

Nuances of Aristotelian philosophy, particularly 'patriarchal submission' is evident in the New Testament "household codes which demand *subordination* and obedience from wives"<sup>9</sup>. This is a typical example of sexism and the oppressive power of language. Unfortunately women who are faithful adherents to patriarchal culture internalise this imposed inferiority and pass it on to their posterity without questioning its value system or doctrine. Hence women have had no role in writing or interpreting scripture, theology and its dogmas, or even liturgical texts.

**Elizabeth Fiorenza Says:**

Sacred language legitimizes and intensifies women's alienation in an androcentric language structure. For centuries women have had to listen to the theological talks and sermons addressed to men. We have had to think twice in order to know whether we were meant or not with the address 'brothers', 'faith of our fathers', 'brotherhood of men', or 'sons of God'<sup>10</sup>.

Besides being excluded, women have been decried and derided. From Augustine and Tertullian, to Aquinas and the authors of the famed mammoth encyclopaedia on demonology(*Malleus Maleficarum* - Kraemer and Sprenger) Church literature is replete with mysogynistic texts that portray bad and distorted images of women. John Chrysostom states: 'Among all savage beasts none is found so harmful as woman'. Or, could anything be more painful than what Augustine of Hippo believed: 'Women are not

8. *Cleaning Up Sexist Language* - Chicago, 8th Day Centre for Justice, Illinois, 1980, p. 13

9. Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, "Patriarchal Structures & The Discipleship of Equals", in *Probe*, Feb/March '84 (Reprinted article by permission of NARW).

10. Fiorenza, op. cit pp 3-16 (Breaking The Silence)

made to the image of God'.

### Male book?

It is said that 'Bible is a male book'. To prove it, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, protagonist for women's rights, not only learnt Greek, but in 1895 rewrote the Bible to rid it of its sexist language, and the unjust way in which women were written and spoken about<sup>11</sup>. The Old Testament Genesis account gives us an insight into the power and authority of the first man. Adam named his 'help-meet' as well as all the birds and animals, thus perpetuating male dominion over them. Something like this has gone on in man-woman relationship almost ever since. The male has done the classifying, the organising and the writing; the female has been the subject of philosophizing and sometimes day dreaming<sup>12</sup>.

The two creation stories show the contradiction between Gen: 1:27 and 3:21-23. Scholars are inclined to believe that the English translation of the first story overlooks the significant aspects revealed in the original Hebrew texts, e.g., man formed from the dust of the earth is 'adham', an ancient Hebrew generic term for humankind. It is for 'adham the protohuman' that God creates a 'help meet-ezer' and not a handmaiden<sup>13</sup>.

The marriage pattern (as mentioned already) is understood as a relationship between head and body — man as head and woman as body (considered evil), as is the relationship between God-Nature, God-Israel and Christ-Church. Such images are perceived to have divinely validated patriarchal marriage patterns, rather than "recognising that these images themselves are ideological sacralizations of a particular social order"<sup>14</sup>.

### Jesus and women

With the advent of Jesus, the patriarchal order recei-

11. Vetterling - Braggin *op.cit.* General Introduction,

12. Arlene Swidler, *Woman in a Man's Church*, New York: Paulist Press 1972 p. 11

13. *Cleaning Up Sexist Language*, *op. cit.* p. 24

14. *Ibid* p. 22

ved a culture shock! Jesus not only broke with tradition when he called God 'Abba'-Father, but recognised women as sharers of his gospel message, as seen in his numerous encounters with women, especially the Samaritan at the well, Mary of Magdala, Susanna, Johanna, the one with the issue of blood, Jarius' daughter, Peter's mother-in-law, and the sisters of Lazarus - Mary and Martha, among several others. Above all women witnessed to the Resurrection! These are but a few examples of Jesus' witness to liberation, on account of which he is known as the first feminist! Interesting also is the fact that Jesus is referred to as the *Anthropos* - human, (not *aner* - male), and also the *New Adam*.

Other scriptural examples portray images of the feminine/masculine aspect of God, and are seen in both the Old and the New Testaments. For example there is the Holy Trinity (masculine/feminine) as one Godhead, mother eagle (Dt. 32:11), and the comforting mother (Is:66:13), Jesus' analogy to God as woman (Lk:15:8-10), reference to himself as 'the hen that gathers her chicks under her wings' (Mt:23:37) or to his birth 'born of the spirit' (Jn:3:5-6).

Such examples are numerous, and are presumably dealt with by other contributors to this issue. Hence not every text in the Bible is oppressive. In fact, the New Testament does not carry a single sexist story of Jesus, and Revelation gives us a number of images of equality as well as non-masculine analogues for God. Hence far from being a 'Male Book' (the result of androcentric mis-interpretations) the Bible dwells on the equality of male and female. John Paul II remarks: "Unfortunately the Christian message about the dignity of women contradicted by the persistent mentality which considers the human being not as a person but as a thing, as an object of trade at the service of selfish interest and mere pleasure; the first victims of this mentality are women"<sup>15</sup>.

The statement draws attention to women's discrimination (sisters and women in Secular Institutes included), and

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15. *Familiaris Consortio*, No. 24, p. 38

the failure of the contemporary Church to recognise women as equal persons. In fact the 'natural resemblance' as 'sign of the reality'<sup>16</sup> is a contradiction in itself. Hence, we need to review seriously Biblical and liturgical texts, as well as ecclesiastical documents and remove every shade of discrimination.

### **Conclusion**

With the focus more and more on the Church as the 'People of God', there is a growing awareness about the discrimination of women, and the problems caused by their exclusion in liturgical and theological texts, prayers and hymns. Though some liturgical texts have been changed, many persons (including women) scoff at even the necessity for it. A more conscious effort, therefore, needs to be made not merely to change language, but also to change attitudes, if we mean to actualise Christ's liberating message.

Since the Church touches individual and social life in a very fundamental way, it is crucial that we begin to think consciously in terms of 'inclusive' language, not only in the Church, but also in our daily lives, beginning at home. Scriptural texts which imply inferiority, and which specifically relate to texts used in the liturgy will need careful scrutiny, if the Eucharist is to become truly a sign and sacrament of unity. Likewise, hymns, prayers and homilies need to be made 'inclusive', by discarding generic terms that have long enough kept women invisible.

Changing language, or degenderising it, will be of no tangible use, if we are unable to catalyze change in terms of Christ's example and his liberating message of love. The problem of sexist language is not merely women's concern, but one that affects the whole faith community. To this end we need change of heart to actualize the birth of a new spirit, that demands a new humanity. Our motto should be: Forward in faith and wholeness. To proclaim Christ, language must be bias free!

Stella Faria

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16. Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Declaration on the Ministerial Priesthood*, 1976, p.42

## Woman Against Woman?

"I didn't want to be - no, never. I didn't want to come. Yet I had to come, had to be, my tears, mingling with my mother's tears.

"What ? Again ! A girl again ! Aren't you ashamed woman ?" growled the man,  
And crushed under the burden of guilt, hiding her face,  
the woman wept.

Unloved, uncared for, hungry, exhausted, the unwanted howled.

That was the entry. The path from then on narrow,  
circuitous, was filled

With stones, but the rhythm the same.

To fetch, to carry, to cook, to wash  
to meet the lust in bed, to bear year after year,  
A submissive silent slave sold to life for nothing.  
And then the exit — sins washed clean in a deep,  
cool pool.

Sins burnt to cinders in a golden blaze -  
Suicide ? Accident ? Murder ? Who cares ?

Just a woman has died

Just a female<sup>1</sup>.

A life-time agony and the 'way of the cross' of Indian women is so poignantly expressed in this poem. Today, many an accusing female finger is pointed towards men, holding them responsible for the ulcerous social practices that have been disfiguring female visage for centuries together. Mass media, especially the press is being effectively utilized to expose male chauvinism; seminars, conferences, public meetings, associations and organizations

1. 'The Unclean, who keep the city clean', by Malairka Karlekar, in *Manushi*, July - August 1979, p. 55.

are planned out for lobbying and to carry out a 'consciousness-raising' campaign among women.

Indian women have thus launched an ideological and operational warfare against male dominance *à la mode* of women Liberation Movement, in a less radical and virulent form though. Indian feminist movement has all the three trends which characterize the international feminism: liberal, radical and socialist feminism. Fortunately it shows a penchant towards liberal and socialist type of liberation movement. This may explain why even some women of the movement begin to ask: 'Are not women also found to be in the role of exploiters ? Are not women themselves, agents of female oppression ? These queries lead us to pose a few more questions: 'In what areas and in what forms does this oppression of woman by woman take place ? What forces are at play behind this phenomenon ? Is the Church conscious of this type of oppression ? Is she keen on finding its causal and remedial factors ?

### **Women oppressors**

A survey conducted in Bombay recently tells us that out of 8000 abortions following pre-natal sex-determination tests through amniocentesis 7999 were female foetuses. Devoid of this medical sophistication, this criminally discriminating practice is carried on in villages in a very crude and cruel manner. If the female child escapes this abortive extinction, it is sure to be condemned to a cold-blooded murder at the hands of its own mother (refusing breast-feeding, while breast-feeding, suffocating to death by placing paddy grains in the throat of the baby) as is happening; for instance, in the Usilampatti region of Madurai District. The mother becomes a killer, why ? Girls crossing this hurdle, enter into the world of her home, where she is to be treated by her own mother as a less human being. She is breast-fed for shorter period than boys; she is given less food (reason why most of the Indian women are anaemic); she is not to be educated. "Why should I waste time and money sending her to school, where she will learn nothing ? What will she do with the Hindi alphabet ? Will it help her to get any other kind of job ?... She

will get married soon and her mother-in-law will send her to clean latrines somewhere. If she goes to school she will get big ideas and then be beaten up by her husband or abused by her mother-in-law<sup>2</sup>.

In India, 80.64% of women over 15 years are illiterate (52.31% of men), 93.56% of Scheduled Caste women of all ages are illiterate (77.64% men), 95.15% of Scheduled Tribe women of all ages are illiterate (82.37% men) (1971 census).

A female child who is not school going is then tied to household chores. At the very tender age of six and seven, most of Indian female children, begin to play the role of mother: looking after the sibblings, fetching water, bringing firewood, tending the kitchen-fire, serving the male members of the family, washing utensils and so on. In return for all these works, she is given what is left after the father and brothers have eaten; her mother insists on this almost as a moral code!

As the female child blossoms into girlhood, an 'iron-cage' is kept ready for her by the mother herself. For many, the home becomes a prison — the adolescent girl's wings are clipped; her swift toes are broken (walk slow girl!); her tongue is tied; lips are locked (talk softly); suppress your smile (smiling is not for you) because 'she who laughs often or walks with bold steps is a harlot' (Tamil proverb); no running, no hop and jump ('mind you, you are a girl!'); no standing near the windows and doors (no, no! that's boys' prerogative). Thus the teen-age girl is chained to the kitchen, glued to a corner of the house. 'Home Sweet Home'!

Mother is the monitor, she is the warden, a kind of 'police man' for the girl; she becomes an instructor and a teacher, giving lessons for life: "You belong to another man, another family, another house. Be a Sita! - adore your husband; be obedient and submissive, be patient whatever he becomes and however he acts. 'Whatever he may be worth, husband is everything for a woman - if he is a

'stone' devoid of all feelings and 'grass', weak and withering, accept, respect, for he is your god.'

Who deforms a growing person into an inarticulate and passive object? Why is it so? Is not the mother again who joining hands with the father, pushes an often unwilling girl into marriage making her a salve and mute victim to a tyrant of a husband and witch-like mother-in-law? Is it not a woman in the form of a mother-in-law who is behind all dowry deaths? Is it not a woman's greed, that keeps so many young, good, intelligent girls unmarried? Is it not the same greed and avarice that wreck hundreds and thousands of blossoming girls, physically and psychologically, pushing them headlong into prostitution?

Flesh-trade, which was once local has now become regional, national and international. Studies and surveys made on this subject, reveal women's collaboration in this business. In several regions, women conduct a 'vocation drive', for this profession, alluring innocent and ignorant girls and frustrated young women with promises of a bright future. It is said that yester-year film stars and money-minded ladies of well-to-do classes own and run brothels in big cities.

Women's oppression by women assumes also a subtle and silent form. High-bred 'lady-ships' with their nose in the air and middle class women who look upward to catch the rich and comfortable life, do a lot of harm to Indian womanhood not only by sitting on the fence, watching the dramas of murder and rape but by upholding and diffusing an ideology and a value system that is essentially anti-feministic. When a young bride's body is reduced to ashes in a funeral pyre on account of dowry and when a poor girl is shut for life in a red-light area these sophisticated women, write and lecture on the purity and devotion of Sita and Savitri, sitting on the seat of judgement, passing verdict on women, who have become prostitutes, call-girls, cabaret dancers and so on. How does this happen?

#### **Woman oppressor - a product of socio-cultural factors**

Social practices of every-day life cannot be treated

in isolation. They are the net products of an interaction between economic-political structures, social mores and cultural system (religion and ideology). Woman's oppression either by men or by women as a social practice, therefore, has to be seen in the total context of the Indian society, where large sections of the population - male and female, adult children — suffer under the oppression of an exploitative system, and justified by a particular ideology and value system.

Kate Millet, one of the three founders of the Women Liberation Movement, treats in her book *Sexual Politics* the socio-economic sources of female oppression. Having a sympathetic discussion of Frederich Engel's *Origins of the Family, private property and the state*, Millet argues, quoting Engels that where both men and women participated in occupations equally for the good of the community, female oppression cannot take place. But with the appropriation of surplus produce and the inauguration of trade, arose the concept of private property and of inheritance — a desire to bequeath property to one's own sons. It was this need for legitimacy that led to patriarchal marriage with its imposition of strict fidelity and subservience on the part of women, to the total structure of human existence<sup>3</sup>.

Kate Millet, sometimes known as 'Mao-tse-tung of Suffragism', adds, that in the patriarchal society in the West as well as other historical civilizations like India, the relationship between man and woman is a power-structure, the male having power and domination over the female. Every avenue of power — military, industrial, technological, scientific, financial, political, administrative - is in male's hands. This power survives and thrives because the patriarchal society had established ideologies and concepts regarding the temperament, role and status of the sexes which are based on the needs and values of the dominant groups. A cultural system emerged that decreed that intelligence, aggression, force and efficacy are character-

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3. 'Women's Liberation in America' - Some acknowledgements and some reservations by Isay Kapp, *Span*, Jan. 1974, p. 26.

ristics of the male, while ignorance, passivity, docility and ineffectuality are female. Man is visile, daring and resourceful, whereas the woman is all sugar and candy, all sweetness and tenderness<sup>4</sup>. Once the temperamental difference is established, different roles and separate codes of conduct for men and women follow suit. So the female is assigned domestic service, to be at the 'beck and call' of the husband and to attend upon children.

In India, which is semi-feudal and semi-capitalistic, economic and sex-exploitation of women vary in degree and intensity according to caste and class, they belong to. But all of them, except a few of the well-to-do, accept this exploitation without the least sign of protest. They not only bear the burden willingly but consider it as a sacred duty to teach their daughters to do the same. How does this happen?

India has her law-givers to enact and enforce special laws for women — the *Stri-Dharma*. Manu, the Indian law-giver par excellence thus said: "Though destitute of virtue, or seeking pleasure elsewhere or devoid of good qualities, yet a husband must be worshipped as God by a faithful wife". According to him, "Heaven is only attained through the husband, and as a reward for having duly worshipped him as God on earth"<sup>5</sup>.

Manu denied to women not only her independence and individuality, but also her right to family property.

An image — subordinate and subservient — is thus already given. Epic writers, provided models who have taken *Stri-dharma* to their heart and lived up to the ideal. Indian women have paradigms of virtue to imitate — Sita, Draupadi, Kunti, Damayanti, Nalayani and several other mythological heroines — all walked, it is said, the tight-rope while expertly balancing the incessant demands of their husbands, in-laws, children and performing the duties their position in the house-hold called for. So Gandhi said,

4. Women's Liberation Movement' in Indian Womanhood through The Ages - Vivekananda Prakashan Kendra, Madras, 1975, p. 252,

5. *Ibid*, p. 252

"Hindu culture has erred on the side of excessive subordination of the wife to the husband and has insisted on the complete merging of the wife in the husband."<sup>6</sup>

Today a hybrid image and identity is carved out for women through cultural tools, especially mass-media and more particularly through films which perpetuate this oppressive tendency. Indian films project a woman in whom classical submissiveness and passive endurance and the modern bourgeois 'go-go' type are beautifully fused together. So much so, an Indian female child in educated families, initiates into a life, full of ambitious dreams — a brilliant academic career, an enviable job, building pay-packet, a rich, clever and handsome husband, a happy-go-lucky life in all comforts and luxuries. But this bourgeois type of life sticks on to old tendencies such as resentment to having female child, preserving dowry-system, having a husband at any cost, scoffing at those who don't have one and so on. Most of our women are self-centred with a magical and naive consciousness, and oblivious of the sufferings of millions of women around them, themselves living a life of fantasy and self-complacency, contented, playing the role of oppressor and oppressed. Who and how could these women be liberated? Can the Church, a religious actor and agent in the society play a role in women's liberation?

### **Church and women's liberation**

Interestingly there are two opposite views about the role of the Church in women's liberation. One argument goes to say that Church herself has long been an oppressor keeping women in moral bondage, by advocating and popularizing values such as blind obedience, modesty, humility, docility, unworldliness, self-sacrifice and so on, as feminine virtues. Nayantara Sahgal quips: "In Europe the art of the Middle Ages created the Madonna in her unwordly ineffable humility, the lines of her body obli-

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6. M.K. Gandhi, *Women and Social Justice* Ahmedabad, Navjivan publications 1947.

terated under the folds of her gown”<sup>7</sup>.

Another opinion holds, “Her (woman’s) participation in congregational prayers, absence of purdah, no rigid insistence on segregation of the sexes, monogamy, emphasis on husband-wife relationship, value of charity and service to others — all these features of Christianity place women in relatively better position than in other religions”<sup>8</sup>.

This is certainly to the Church’s credit. However one can neither deny nor ignore the fact that Indian Christian women do have the same heart-aches and head-aches which their non-christians suffer from. Christian women, in their domestic life and outside are oppressed. Church can help them, if she herself becomes aware of the structural and cultural forces that are at play behind female oppression and realizes the tremendous power which she has as a socializing agent of a liberating ideology and value system. As an ideological power, she can tie and untie the bondage of women.

Mary, mother of Christ is shown as virgin and mother — a model of traditional feminine virtues. Women’s oppression demands that she should be projected by the church as the woman of *Magnificat* — raising a cry of liberation of all those who are oppressed.

Church should also realize that education is an effective tool for liberation-work — not the type of educational activity which she is so actively involved in. Schools and colleges today reflect and strengthen the traditional prejudices of inequality through their curricula, the classification of subjects on the basis of sex and the unwritten code of conduct enforced on their pupils<sup>9</sup>. What is required is an education for liberation, i.e., conscientizing young girls and women in rural and urban areas.

7. ‘The Women in India’ - Nayantara Saghāl in *Span*, January 1974, p. 36

8. Towards Equality, comprehensive Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India, New Delhi, Department of Social Welfare 1974, p. 41-46.

9. *Ibid*, p. 282

In 1966, a Chinese women magazine carried the following message, "We (Chinese women) live for the purpose of making a greater contribution to the Chinese revolution and the world revolution and for the purpose of making the lives of others better. Only this is the greatest happiness... We must be 'oxen' to the proletariat and masses of the people; work for the people until we are exhausted"<sup>10</sup>.

The Chinese communist party was idealistic and pragmatic enough to create an optimistic confidence and sense of purpose among women who had long been under the feudal patriarchal ideology of ancient China. It is high time that the Church in India inaugurated a revolution in human habits and custom, mobilized her thousands of religious women to work like 'oxen' to the oppressed women and men as well!

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10. 'Women in China' - A Pro Mundi Vita publication - no. 40, Belgium 1975, p. 18.

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# Women in Hindu View and Way of Life

It is not easy to define the term Hindu. It stands for a mighty complex that comprises Aryan and Dravidian elements, that has resulted from the fusion of invaders and aborigines. The urban Hindu is not quite the same as his rural counterpart. Here too we have the classical and the folk traditions, the great and the little traditions. After thousands of years of commingling we may not easily find a pure specimen, but we do notice that some elements are more prominent in one part of the society and almost ignored by the other. Woman belongs to the little tradition, but her life is governed by the norms laid down by the great tradition<sup>1</sup>. In a way, the Indian woman is a symbol of Hinduism: a complex which is factually made up of a very large section from the little tradition – not merely in terms of persons, but also in matters of beliefs, symbols, myths – but still dominated by the great tradition<sup>2</sup>.

It is not my intention to document the actual situation of women in Hinduism. In my study I shall try to explain how in the Hindu tradition woman is both a symbol and a reality. As a symbol, she stands for that wisdom which can redeem man. But she also symbolizes the passion that can ruin man. As a reality she is talked about by the Hindu law-givers, who do not appear to be too kind to her. All this, I hope, will explain to some extent at least the why of the present plight of the Indian woman. It will also indicate some guidelines for a liberation process.

1. Cf. M. Mies: *Indian Woman and Patriarchy* (New Delhi, Concept Publishers, 1980), p. 38.

2. For the significance of this distinction, cfr. L. Lobo: "Towards an Inculturation in the Non-Sanskritic Tradition", *Vidyajyoti*, XLIX (1985) pp. 16-28.

### Woman as man's better half

The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka-upaniṣad* tells us that in the beginning man was alone. Consequently he experienced no delight. There was a vacuum in his life. He caused himself to be divided, and that is how husband and wife came to be. Woman is man's better half, filling the vacuum he otherwise experiences<sup>3</sup>. This idea that was first expressed about 600 B.C. is repeated in a very popular text about 1000 A.D. The *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* says that the wife, being the other half of man, helps him to achieve the first three goals of human life: *artha*, *kīma*, and *dharma*; and with her help man can easily conquer his senses<sup>4</sup>. The Hindu tradition very highly eulogizes the faithful wife — this itself is seen as one symptom of the malaise of male chauvinism.

The traditional story that best illustrates the power of the faithful spouse is the episode of Satyavan and Savitri. Savitri is warned that Satyavan is doomed to death within a year, but she is not prepared to change her decision to marry him. After their marriage she goes with him to the forest. Three days before the fatal hour she fasts and prays that her husband's life be spared, but in vain. Yama comes and takes away the soul of Satyavan, leaving behind his lifeless body. Savitri follows Yama, engages him in a conversation, elicits boons from him, and eventually gets Yama to restore her husband back to life<sup>5</sup>.

This traditional belief of Hindus finds its echo also in contemporary literature. I shall take just one example. In his novel *Chemmeen*, Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai depicts the life and beliefs of a coastal village in Kerala. The fisherfolk believed that however turbulent the sea may become, it will not harm the fishermen as long as their wives are faithful to them. Karuthamma, a young Hindu woman, is forced to marry Falani, even though she was deeply in love with a Muslim, Parekutti. Time does not heal the wound in the heart of both the lovers. One night, when Parekutti can no longer bear his loneliness, he comes to Karuthamma for solace. It is a very stormy night and

3. 1.4. 1-3.

4. 3.14. 16-19.

5. *Mahabharata*, 3.277-83.

Palani is out with his boat. Karuthamma meets Parekutti on the sea-shore and surrenders herself totally to him. Palani is swallowed by the sea, which does not spare Karuthamma and Parekutti either. The calm follows, and in the sky one can see Arundhati, the morning star, the symbol of conjugal fidelity<sup>6</sup>.

There is an intimate relation between man's idea of himself and his idea of God, between anthropology and theology. If man sees woman as his completion, as essential for his well being, if man needs wisdom (*sāvitri*) to possess authentic existence (*satyavān*), then within the divine too there is such a need. Sanskrit and Tamil Shaiva writers love to play upon the word *Siva*. Just as without the vowel *i*, *Siva* becomes *sava* (corpse), so too Siva without Parvati. For this reason God is *ardha-nāri-śvara* (the lord who has woman as his half). Parvati is the energy (*sakti*) of Siva, Lakshmi is the beauty (*śri*) of Vishnu. These ideas belong to the great tradition, because even though the Divine is male-female, yet it is the male that dominates. In the *Ardhanārīśvara* icon, Siva is invariably on the right, and Parvati on the left. There is one myth, however, in which the little tradition succeeds in asserting itself, placing woman not just on the left of man, but above man and even above all the gods. We shall now turn to this myth<sup>7</sup>.

Mahisha, the Buffalo-demon defeats all the gods, and becomes the king of heaven: a total reversal of all values! The gods betake themselves to Viṣṇu and Śiva. From the combined wrath of all the gods the Goddess is born. It is significant that our text in describing her appearance says that a woman (*nāri*) was born<sup>8</sup>. This story is known to the *Mahābhārata*, but in that version, it is the son of Siva who kills the demon<sup>9</sup>. The Buffalo-demon is evocative of death, since a buffalo is the vehicle of Yama, the

6. For the English translation, see *Chemmeen*, tr. N. Menon, Bombay, Jaico Pubs., 1978

7. I have used the text as found in V.S. Agrawala: *Devi-mahatmya* (Varanasi, All India Kashiraj Trust, 1963), chs, 2 - 4.

8. Her first appearance is mentioned in 2.12, where she is called *nari*.

9. 3.221. 52-56; 7.141.14.

god of death. The black (*kāla*) buffalo symbolizes time (*kala*) and death (*kala*), for death is essentially a function of time. The Goddess is symbolic of life, life beyond death. She is Ambika<sup>10</sup>, the mothering womb which alone can ensure man's life. I have a feeling that in this myth we have not only the self-assertion of a suppressed matriarchal tradition, but also the perfection of an earlier patriarchal myth. The episode of Satyavan and Savitri has an anthropological and moral tone, while the story of Mahisha and the Goddess is mainly theological and cosmological. The Goddess is the true Savitri<sup>11</sup>, for she is not just the wisdom man has, but the source of all life and life-giving wisdom<sup>12</sup>.

### Woman as man's bitter half

The idea that man and woman are the two halves of a greater whole is first articulated within the Hindu tradition in the famous dialogue between Yama and Yami, the primordial twins<sup>13</sup>. In this hymn from the *Rg-veda*, Yami tries to seduce her own twin brother Yama, telling him that already in the womb they were part of each other. Yama remains firm in his refusal, insisting that such behaviour is sinful. It is not without reason that, in the subsequent Hindu mythological thinking, Yama becomes Dharmaraja, the Lord of Righteousness. This story of Yami trying to seduce her brother is one of the most frequent motif of the vast world of stories of Hinduism. The classical example is that of the celestial courtesan Menaka, sent by the gods to tempt Visvamitra, as the latter was engaged in severe penance which threatened their supremacy.

This motif of woman as tempter is successfully used by contemporary Hindu novelists. We shall study one example. In his novel *Samskara*, U.R. Anantha Murthy portrays an episode in the life of a very learned Brahmin from

10. In our story, "Ambika" is found ten times, while "Candika" six times. However, in the whole text of the *Devi-mahatmya*, the former occurs twenty-six times, while the latter twenty-nine times

11. 1.15.

12. For a more detailed study of this myth, see S. Anand. "The Lady and the Demon", *Vidyajyoti*, L (1986), pp. 454-68.

13. *Rg-veda*, 10.10.

a traditional South Indian village. Praneshacharya is very devoted to his sick wife, doing for her all that a mother does for her invalid child, even though her sickness deprives him of the joys of married life. He is the most learned and the most respected Brahmin in his village. Yet one night he is seduced by the mistress of another Brahmin, whose corpse is still to be cremated, and this happened after he had spent a whole day in the temple of Maruti in prayer and fasting<sup>14</sup>. Later, when Praneshacharya recalls that night, he almost defends himself by comparing that event to the affair of Visvamitra and Menaka<sup>15</sup>.

What was implicit in the early stories of the seduction of sages by women becomes very explicit in subsequent didactic texts. The *Bhagavata-purana* says that woman is the door to hell, like a grass-covered well leading man to sure death, like the alluring call of a hunter out to trap its victim<sup>16</sup>. She is like the fire that sets ablaze a pot full of butter-oil<sup>17</sup>. In fact the *Bhagavata-purana* goes so far as to say that woman was created by Brahma precisely to arouse desire in man<sup>18</sup>.

The same text offers us another explanation as to why woman is seen as a great threat to man. After the Mahabharata war Krishna departs for his heavenly abode. In his absence Evil (Kali) and the Age of Evil (Kali-yuga) dominate the earth. This is symbolized in a scene in which a Shudra, a member of the lowest caste, dressed in royal attire, is cruelly beating a bull and a cow. The former represents righteousness and the latter the earth. Luckily for the animal pair, King Parikshit arrives on the scene, and orders the Shudra to leave his kingdom. But wherever the Shudra thinks of going he sees the rule of Parikshit, and so he requests the King to assign him a limited dwelling. He is given four places to dwell in: dice, wine, butcher's shop, and woman<sup>19</sup>!

14. For the English translation, see *Samskara*, tr, A. K. Ramanujan, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2nd ed., 1978, pp. 62-64.

15. *Ibid*, p. 98.

16. 3.31.39-42.

17. 7.12.9.

18. 6.18.30.

19. 1.17.38.

It is not only man who is ruined by woman, but even the devas and the asuras are bewitched by her. When they were disputing about the ambrosia obtained from the churning of the ocean, Viṣṇu, appearing as a charming woman, distracts the asuras<sup>20</sup>. Brahma, after performing severe penance, is yet unable to control himself. He is swept off his feet by the charms of his own daughter<sup>21</sup>. Siva, the otherwise ascetic god, is completely overcome by the beauty of the bewitching damsel, the form taken by Visnu to distract the demons. He just cannot control himself<sup>22</sup>.

This negative attitude towards woman as the source of temptation, and consequently as the cause of man's bondage, gets its philosophical formulation in Samkhya Philosophy. There are two eternals: Puruṣa and Prakṛti. The former is beyond all change, being merely an indifferent witness. The latter is the source of all confusion, all bondage. Prakṛti is even compared to a dancing girl<sup>23</sup>. Hence it is only in isolation (*kaivalya*) that salvation can be experienced.

### Woman and the Hindu law-givers

We have seen that the Hindu attitude towards woman is ambivalent, but more inclined to be negative. So too, the Hindu law-givers have some very good things to say about woman. But the overall picture is dark. This is to be expected: law is the concretisation of attitude. Thus Manu says that fathers, brothers, husbands and brothers-in-law, who desire the welfare of their families, must honour women, because where women are honoured, the gods love to dwell, but where women are disregarded all other actions are futile. Hence a house where a daughter or daughter-in-law is sad does not prosper<sup>24</sup>.

The same Manu teaches that woman was created for the sake of procreation (*prajana*)<sup>25</sup> and thus woman in herself does not seem to have any value. Hence if a

20. 8.8.9.

21. 3.12.20-33

22. 8.12.31.

23. *Samkhya-karika*, 59.24. *Manu-smṛti*, 3.55-58.25. *Ibid*, 9.96.

woman was barren, her husband could bring in a second wife. In her reflection on the place of woman in the Indian patriarchal pattern, Mies rightly concludes: "Since procreation of descendants, and in fact of male descendants, was the most important worldly and religious goal of the Aryan Hindu, the purpose of life of the woman was determined only by this goal."<sup>26</sup>

If woman does not have any value in herself, then she is like the property of man. The more wives one has the greater is his social status (polygamy)<sup>27</sup>. On the other hand, when a man gets some property he shares with his brothers (polyandry). This was the fate of Draupadi<sup>28</sup>. For the same reason, only man could ensure the safety of woman. In her childhood her father took care of her, in her youth her husband, and in her old age her son<sup>29</sup>. This negative attitude, so sharp in the Hindu law-givers, is already foreshadowed in the Vedic texts. The great historian of Hindu law, P. V. Kane grants that though in the earlier stage the woman's position was better, yet "even in the Vedic times there was an undercurrent of opinion which was hostile to women, sneered at them, and treated them with scorn"<sup>30</sup>. We shall now see how the Hindu law views woman in her three functions or states in society.

### Woman as daughter

The Aryan father was much more eager to have a son than a daughter. It was the son who freed his parents from hell<sup>31</sup>. He freed his father from his debts, both religious and economic<sup>32</sup>. Hence a woman who bore only girls could be cast off. A marriageable girl who had no brother would be considered inauspicious, and so she

26. Mies: *Op cit.*, p. 41.

27. P. V. Kane: *History of Dharmashastra*, 5 vols. (Pune, Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1968 - 74), vol. II, p. 551.

28. *Mahabharata*, 1.187.23-24.

29. Kane: *Op. cit.*, P. 577.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 575.

31. Manu explains *putra* (son) as one who saves (*trai*) his father from hell (*put*) *Manu-smrti*, 9.138

32. R.B. Pandey. *Hindu Samskaras* (Delhi, Motilal Banarsi Dass, 2nd ed., 1969), pp. 49, 57.

would have a hard time in finding a husband. If in a family due to some calamity the brother(s) dies and not the sister(s) then she is considered to be the killer of her brother(s)<sup>33</sup>. The anxiety of the Aryan father to have a son can be seen from the fact that when the first signs of pregnancy appeared, the woman had to undergo a special *samskara* to ensure the birth of a male child (*pumsavanam*)<sup>34</sup>.

If the son was the one who safeguarded the future of the family, there was no need for a girl to be educated. Hence there was no provision for women receiving the *upanayana-samskara*, the rite which marks the beginning of a sacred student life<sup>35</sup>. Thus the storehouses of sacred learning were beyond the reach of women. Consequently it was more difficult for women to attain salvation. It was for their sake that Vyasa composed the *Mahabharata*<sup>36</sup>. In this respect the Brahmin woman was no better than the Shudra<sup>37</sup>. In the Sanskrit tradition we do not have any woman whose writings/compositions have come down to us. The ones we do know — Mirabai, Andal, Akkamma, Lalla — in a way belong to the little tradition. For the woman the only *samskara* which made up for the absence of *upanayana* was marriage, and this may explain why in course of time the girl was given in marriage at an early age — an age when her brother received that initiation<sup>38</sup>. This reluctance of the orthodox Hindu to impart sacred learning to his daughter does not belong only to the distant past.

### Woman as bride and wife

Since woman had no value by herself it was imperative for her to marry, otherwise there was no hope of heaven for her<sup>39</sup>. Yet, if a father failed to arrange for the marriage of his daughter, she herself could find a husband for herself, but in this case she had to leave behind the

33. Mies: *Op. cit.*, pp. 42-43

34. Pandey: *Op. cit.*, p.60

35. *Manu-smriti*, 2.66 allows a woman to go through *upanayana*, but in her case the rite must be performed without the *mantras*. According to Brahmanical theology the efficacy of a rite depends on the *mantra*.

36. *Bhagavata-purana*, 1.4.29

37. See for instance *Bhagavad-gita*, 9.32

38. Kane: *Op. cit.*, p.443

39. Kane: *Op. cit.*, p. 443

ornaments she had received from her home people, otherwise she would be considered a thief<sup>40</sup>. I spoke of the failure of the father, because even though the idea of a girl choosing her own husband is accepted as valid — the *gandharva-vivāha*, as also the practice of *svayamvara* — yet the two most common forms of marriage today are the giving away of the bride by the father, with all ornaments or the selling of the girl for a bride-price — the *brahma* and *āsura* forms of marriage<sup>41</sup>. In both cases the girl has little say. She is almost the property of her father before marriage, and of her husband after her marriage.

Offspring seems to be the dominant concern of married life. This is clear from the word used for consummation: *garbha-ñdhana*. One writer goes so far as to say "this ceremony legalizes in a religious sense the consummation of marriage"<sup>42</sup>. So too the husband had to have sex with his wife whenever she was in her fertile period<sup>43</sup>. The act of intercourse, necessary as it was for procreation, defiled the man, and therefore he was obliged to have a bath after it<sup>44</sup>. This defilement was all the more great when the woman had already been sexually enjoyed by another man<sup>45</sup>. This will help us to understand the phenomenon of child-marriage.

According to some Hindu-law books, a girl was to be given away in marriage when she was still *nagnika*, that is (small enough to go about) naked<sup>46</sup>. It has also been suggested that for a girl marriage was equivalent to *upanayana*, hence she was married off at the age when the boy was given *upanayana*<sup>47</sup>. Another reason given is that from the start of her fertile periods a girl should have a husband who can impregnate her, otherwise the non-

40. *Manu-smṛti*, 9.91-92

41. Kane: *Op. cit.*, p. 525.

42. V. S. Apte: *The Student's Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (Delhi, Motilal Banarsi-dass, rep. 1970), p. 183.

43. Pandey: *Op. cit.*, pp. 56-57.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 51.

45. Kane: *Op. cit.*, pp. 608-12.

46. J. Jolly: *Hindu Law and Custom* (Calcutta, Greater India Society, 1928), p. 119. See also Pandey: *Op. cit.*, p. 188.

47. Kane: *Op. cit.*, p. 443.

utilisation of her fertility would land her parents in hell<sup>48</sup>.

So great was the dependence of the woman on her husband that even in matters religious she had little freedom or significance. Though Jaimini allows woman to sacrifice, because she too desires heaven<sup>49</sup>, yet "gradually, the wife lost all importance in Vedic sacrifice, and came to be a silent spectator of all the weary details that had to be gone through by the sacrificer and the priest"<sup>50</sup>. The wife could perform religious acts only with her husband or with his consent<sup>51</sup>.

If the woman is seen only in terms of offspring and in relation to the father of her children, then we can understand the plight of the widow. Kane sums up the Hindu mentality very briefly thus: "The position of the Hindu widow was miserable and her lot was unenviable."<sup>52</sup> The cruel practice of *sati* (widow-burning) is not known in early Hindu society, which even allowed remarriage. Slowly asceticism became the norm for the widow, and eventually self-immolation on the husband's pyre is seen as the highest form of asceticism and wifely virtue<sup>53</sup>. This self-immolation also "liberated her from a miserable, hated, unloved and lonely life in the house of her father-in-law"<sup>54</sup>.

This way of looking at woman as the soil which is valuable only to the extent it produces fruit is well brought out in a recent novel based on the life of a high Brahmin family. The young wife of the only son fails to conceive even after two years of married life. The old widowed mother-in-law was constantly observing the young wife to see if there were any signs of pregnancy. One day Mohini, the town-bred daughter-in-law could bear it no longer. She bluntly tells the old lady: "It isn't what you're thinking. Mother. I am not going to have a baby. I never will". The

48. B. Walker: *Hindu World*, 2 vols. (London, George Allen & Unwin, 1968), vol. II, p. 62.

49. *Mimamsa-sutra*, 6.1.6-13.

50. Kane. *Op. cit.*, vol. V, p. 1288.

51. *Ibid.*, vol. II, p. 559

52. Kane: *Op. cit.*, p. 586.

53. S. Rao: "Suttee", *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute*, XIV (1933), pp. 230-31.

54. Mies: *Op. cit.*, p. 49,

mother, who till now had maintained a tremendous dignity, was staggered, and hits out at the young wife: "What evi destiny made me bring you into this house? Your barrenness will curse it for all time. You will take the life of your husband..."<sup>55</sup> Things do not end there. The old lady goes so far as to suggest to another young woman to try to cast her spell on her son, telling her: "His life hangs on your decision"<sup>56</sup>. Thus for the old lady the fruitfulness of her daughter-in-law is only a means to perpetuate the family and its tradition. For this if one woman does not help then another can be used!

### Woman as mother

If the Brahmanical tradition tends to look at woman with little respect, then there is one exception. Having surveyed the situation, Kane concludes: "In the midst of this dark picture and undeserved condemnation of woman there is one very bright spot, viz., the high eulogy of and the reverence for the mother in all *Smyti* works"<sup>57</sup>. Mies explains this "apotheosis of the mother" as the "direct consequence of the requirements of a patriarchal social system"<sup>58</sup>. I am inclined to believe that there is definitely some truth in her conclusion, because a woman who had given birth only to daughters could be by-passed, and her husband could marry another woman.

In an earlier section I have shown how the cult of the goddess, which originally belonged to the little tradition, becomes a major religious phenomenon of India. As there is an intimate relation between man's idea of the deity and of himself, the cult of the mother-goddess may also be one factor for the great reverence that is shown to the human mother, as Mies puts it "the mother-idealisation represents an example of the process of universalisation of an element of the pre-Aryan "little tradition" and its integration into the "great tradition".... The worship of the

55. B. Bhattacharya: *Music for Mohini* (Delhi, Orient Paperbacks, rep. 1984), p. 167. 56. *Ibid.*, p. 184.

57. Kane. *Op. cit.*, P. 580.

58. Mies: *Op. cit.*, p. 46.

divine mother was bound to have considerable effect on the position of the earthly mother"<sup>59</sup>.

### Some concluding remarks

It seems to me that we cannot understand our attitude towards woman without at the same time reflecting on our attitude towards nature and our concept of the deity. The Aryans were originally nomads. For them sons were very important: they were needed to fight their enemies, to protect their property, because in a nomadic context there is no other possibility of security arrangements. They went from place to place in search of pasture. They were not particularly concerned about the land, but only its produce. So too woman was the soil that produced sons. Just as they would leave a piece of land after the pasture was exhausted, so too a barren woman was worthless. But the nomad still had a more-than-individual concern. There was concern about the clan, about collective survival. So woman had more than an individual usefulness. She served a collective need.

Contemporary man too is slowly becoming more and more nomadic, more and more uprooted. He is uprooted not only from his soil, but also from his tradition, from his community. He is becoming more and more individualistic, concerned for production process. In schools and colleges subjects that are job-oriented are selected by the brighter students, and the study of history is going down. The concern for new and "original" models makes us impatient with the past! All this affects modern man's attitude towards woman. She too is part of his production process. Writers portray her as the seductive beauty to increase the sale of their cheap literature. Box-office films use her to attract the uncritical crowds. Advertising agencies depict buxom women handling even heavy earth movers! Contractors employ her because they need to pay less. With the phenomenon of urbanization we have more and more red light areas.

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59. *Ibid.*

The nomad had little attachment to land. So too with modernisation, industrialisation and urbanisation man is more and more a stranger to land, alienated from nature. I think that there is a relation between our attitude towards woman and our attitude towards nature. A community that does not care for nature, except in terms of production, a community that ignores ecology, will have little respect for woman. If man is to rediscover woman as person, as symbol of transcendence, then to some extent he has to discover the personal element in nature. Nature cannot be just the source of raw material for his factories. She is the presence of transcendence<sup>60</sup>!

The nomad naturally would think of God in masculine terms. This in turn affects his attitude towards woman. If the masculine element is apotheosized, then woman can exist only in submission to the male. Hence if we need to change our attitude towards woman, then we need to rethink our theology: Is God exclusively masculine? Is priesthood a masculine monopoly? It is true that the life of consecrated virginity affirms the significance of woman independently of procreativity. But the question is: In the Church is the nun not dominated by the male? In fact she is often used as source of cheap labour. Hence to change the situation of the Indian woman it is also necessary to change our Christian life and thought.

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60. Cf. S. Anand: "Advaita or Agape", *Vidyajyoti* L (1986), pp. 7-30.

## Shariah: a Reflection on the Issue

Hardly any issue in recent times has so touched the sentiments of Indian Muslims as the Supreme Court judgement in April 1985 on Shah Bano Begum's case. The Supreme Court delivered a historic judgement bestowing maintenance rights on divorced Muslim women who, hitherto, had been denied this right under their personal law, the *Shariah*.

In order to understand the status of women in Islam it is essential to see the role of *Shariah* (Muslim Personal Law) which controls and regulates every aspect of a Muslim's life. *Shariah* has four sources: the *Qur'an*, *Sunnah* of the prophet (tradition), *qiyas* (analogical reasoning), and *ijma* (consensus).

The *Qur'an* is the central fact of the Islamic religious experience, the revelation of God, the sourcebook of Islamic values. The *Qur'an* was revealed to Muhammad over a period of twenty-three years in order to meet the needs of the Islamic society in Mecca and then in Medina. Some of the most important and fundamental reforms of customary law in the areas of marriage, divorce and inheritance were made by the *Qur'an* to improve the status of women.

The *Sunnah* of the prophet concretized and interpreted the *Qur'anic* values. Just as during the lifetime of the Prophet Muslims turned to him for decisions, so after his death, looked to the Prophetic example for guidance. Technically, *Sunnah* is divided into three categories: 1, the Prophet's statements and sayings; 2, his deeds; and 3, his silent or tacit approval of certain deeds which he had knowledge of. The record of the prophetic words and deeds is to be found in the narrative reports or traditions (*Hadiths*) in six major collections of which the *Sahihs* of

Muslim (d.875) and the Sahihs of al-Bukhari (d.870) have enjoyed high reputation.

*Qiyas* (analogical reasoning) is a restricted form of *ijtihad* (personal reasoning or interpretation). It establishes the relevance of a ruling in one case to another case because of a similarity in the attribute upon which the ruling is based.

*Ijma* (consensus) is the unanimous agreement of the jurists of a particular age on a specific issue. *Ijma* derived its authority as a source of law from the *hadith* (tradition) that records the Prophet as saying, "My community will never agree on an error". If questions arose about a Qur'anic text or tradition, or a problem for which no sunna (practice) of the community existed, the jurists applied their own reasoning to arrive at an interpretation.

According to tradition Shariah is divine law whereas *Fiqh* (jurisprudence) is the product of human understanding that has sought to interpret and apply the Divine Law in space and time. It is the confusion of this distinction between shariah and fiqh re-inforced by the doctrine of *taqlid* (imitation), that has led to the sacrosanct attitude towards the fiqh of the ancestors. The early qadis (jurists) were fully aware of the profound difference between the perfection of Shariah and the imperfection of man's comprehension of it. Unfortunately many don't make any distinction between shariah and fiqh and make the mistake of treating both as of equal importance and sacredness.

Before we embark upon the study of the present status of Muslim women in India we have to see her status according to the teachings of the Qur'an. Islam raised the status of women by the Qur'anic precepts. By banning the burial of young girls of five or six years of age alive the Qur'an established that both sexes are equally important before God<sup>1</sup>. In the case of inheritance woman was given the right to get a share from her parents<sup>2</sup>. Another important right given to her was the right to possess the wealth whatsoever she had earned herself<sup>3</sup>. She was

1. The Qur'an 6:151 .

2. Ibid, 4:7

3. Ibid, 4:32

given the right to receive dower (*mehr*) from her husband according to his status<sup>4</sup>. She was also given freedom in the choice of her husband and to divorce her husband with his consent with return of dower originally paid by him.

According to Islam woman is not blamed for Adam's first mistake<sup>5</sup>, because both Adam and Eve jointly disobeyed God. Even during the lifetime of the Prophet, women accompanied their brothers on expedition where they served as water-carriers and nurses. Some of them, including the Prophet's wife Khadijah ran business. Caliph Umar appointed Shifa, daughter of Abdullah, an officer to check corruption in the market.

Aisha, one of the wives of the Prophet, openly took part in the civil war after the assassination of the third Caliph Uthman. She took the side of rebels against the fourth Caliph Ali and led the troops in the battle of "Camel". No one among the prominent companions of the Prophet took the position that a woman had no business to participate in such public matters or political affairs. Those who assert that women are not trustworthy contradict themselves by accepting many hadiths (traditions) reported by Aisha<sup>6</sup>.

But the ulama during the early and later periods of Islam commented on the relevant verses of the Qur'an wrongly. Desire to dominate and other selfish motivations tempted the early male chauvinistic ulama to distort and misinterpret the Qur'anic texts. For the coming generations of Muslims these wrong interpretations were as sacred as the textual content of the Qur'an itself.

### Polygamy

"If you fear you shall not be able to deal justly with orphans, marry women of your choice; two, three or four; but if you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly with them, then marry only one or a captive that your right

4. Ibid, 4:24

5. Ibid, 20.121

6. *Eullettin of School of Oriental Studies*, Vol. VII. Part 2 (1934), pp 317-321

hand possess, that will be more suitable to prevent you from doing injustice..."<sup>7</sup> Polygamy in Islam is justified on the basis of this Qur'anic verse. An analysis of its context and purpose would reveal the absurdity of justifying polygamy.

This verse was revealed after the battle of Uhud (625) which left the Muslim community with many widows and orphans, and some captives of war. In order that the orphans and widows must be given the best protection and perfect justice, the Muslim men were asked to marry the number they could deal with justly up to the maximum of four. It was the charity and compassion for the widows of his friends killed in battle that compelled a man to offer the shelter of his home to such miserable women. Thus during the time of the Prophet it was a need which ceased to exist later. But the ulama adhered to the letter of the law rather than the spirit of it.

"And indeed you cannot do justice between women, even when you are eager to be (completely just)."<sup>8</sup> Absolute prohibition of polygamy may be based on this requirement of impartiality and the impossibility of its full realization today. The overall logical consequence of these pronouncements is a banning of polygamy. At that time polygamy was accepted on a legal plane with the intention of substituting it by monogamy later. But the later Muslims (ulama) did not pay attention to the spirit of the Qur'an and, in fact, thwarted its intentions.

At the same time polygamy, as it is practised today in India reduced Muslim women to the status of an object of man's sensual pleasures, a toy in the hands of a husband, an unpaid slave. Such a co-wife who is demoralised, humiliated, frustrated and depressed, has to look elsewhere for liberation.

Muslim women in some other Islamic countries are getting liberated from this slavery. In Jordan, there is provision that a woman can stipulate that the husband

7. The Qur'an 4:3

8. Ibid., 4:129

should not saddle her with a co-wife. In Iran and Iraq marriage with more than one wife is not allowed without the permission of the Qadi. In Tunisia plurality of wives is positively prohibited. In Syria the Qadi can refuse a married man permission to marry another woman if it is proved that he is not capable of maintaining two wives. In Egypt they regard the practice of polygamy as harmful, humiliating, and degrading to women.

### **Divorce**

Muslim law laid down that Marriage is a contract for which the consent of both the man and the woman is obtained. Though some Muslims tend to deal with this relation as sacred, marriage for Muslims is not a sacrament. As a contract mutual agreement and consent are essential for marriage. But when it comes to divorce the woman is not consulted at all. A woman has no say in the matter while a man can divorce her even in her absence. A large section of Indian Muslim women had been denied the right and the benefit of education and were economically dependent on their husbands which makes their position extremely vulnerable.

The Holy Qur'an, no doubt, prescribes the ideal manner of divorce that is to be followed by all Muslims without exception. Triple divorce (divorce of *bid'at*, i.e., innovative) is forbidden by the Qur'an and is sinful. In triple divorce triple declaration is made during a single *tuhr* (when the woman is free from menstrual cycle) by pronouncing one sentence or three separate sentences by which the marriage is irrevocably dissolved. Only the husband's conscience served as a restraint from the use of such disapproved forms of divorce. It is a contradiction that a particular type of divorce forbidden by the Qur'an and thus made sinful is valid before the Muslim Personal Law. Since many Muslim husbands use this powerful weapon namely triple divorce without any reservation, the miserable Muslim wives live in constant anxiety and tension. Their anxiety and tension increase as they get old and become less glamorous.

It is interesting to see the contrast when we come to a Muslim woman's right to divorce. A Muslim wife requires the consent of her husband to divorce. Many Islamic countries have brought about timely reforms to remedy this miserable condition of women. In Egypt a man who divorces his wife ignoring the procedures stipulated by the law is liable to a maximum sentence of six months imprisonment and/or a maximum fine of 200 Egyptian pounds. A wife must be informed if her husband takes another wife, and she has the right to sue for divorce if she disapproves of the marriage. If a husband conceals from his new life that he is already married, this, too, will constitute grounds for divorce by the new wife. Despite these reforms, it remains ironic that Egypt, which is a leader in family reform in the Middle East and continues to be a country in which women enjoy a relatively advanced status, still has not been able to pass legislation requiring that a husband obtain court permission for a polygamous marriage or a divorce. In Tunisia extra-judicial divorces are no longer effective. Any divorce outside a court of law is without legal effect.

It is high time that Muslim women in India should awake and fight for their right of equality in the field of divorce which hitherto has been the monopoly of men.

### Maintenance

The judgement of the Supreme Court to give maintenance to Shah Bano who was divorced at the age of seventy-three after forty three years of marriage, by her husband has led to an unprecedented Islamic resurgence not seen in the country for decades. It has rendered the Muslims a troubled, tormented community, torn by a serious internal schism between the vocal fundamentalists and the subdued but determined liberal minority<sup>9</sup>.

In cases of triple divorces which is very commonly practised by the Sunni Hanafi Muslims in India, the divorce is not of woman's choice only, she is just thrown out in

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9. Shekhar Gupta with Farzand Ahmed and Inderjit Badhwar, *India Today*, (January 31, 1986) p. 90

the street by the cruel husbands. If marriage is a contract and both parties have equal rights the contract cannot be terminated by the husband so arbitrarily without giving her a chance to arbitrate or reconcile. If he does throw her out arbitrarily he must be made responsible for her maintenance even beyond the period of iddah (three months) till her death or remarriage. The judgement passed by the supreme court was a big relief for divorced Muslim women.

### The Muslim Women Bill

The historic judgement in the Shah Bano case is its recognition of the right of a Muslim divorced woman to *mataaun bil maaroof* — a reasonable and fair provision to be made to her after divorce, as provided by the Qur'an II: 241. Unfortunately the new Bill mercilessly undermined the right defended by the Supreme Court judgement in Shah Bano case.

Vimochana, Forum for Women's Rights, condemned the Bill as being "anti-woman". Ms. Madhubhushan of Vimochana said: "It is clear that the Bill has not been formulated out of any concern for the plight of the divorced Muslim women. It will only further encourage Muslim men to desert their wives at will, there being no legal or moral binding to provide maintenance."<sup>10</sup>

As long as society continued to discriminate on grounds of gender and the man remained the breadwinner with the woman confined to the house unable to stand on her feet, the obligations of her husband to maintain her and her children after divorce had to be recognized and accepted. The provision which makes allowance from the wakf board was dominated by those opposed to the Shah Bano judgement. By depriving a Muslim woman of the option to seek legal redressal to the problem of arbitrary divorce, the Bill attempts to push her back into the folds of her purdah.

### Liberation of Muslim women

A major concern of the Qur'an was the betterment

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10. "Muslim Bill Resented" *Deccan Herald* (Tuesday, March 4, 1986), p.5

of women's position by establishing her legal capacity, granting her economic rights, and thus raising her social status. Superiority of men over women originated from their (men's) greater responsibility as protectors and maintainers, which was the socio-economic context of Arabian society during the Prophet's time. Men by virtue of their duty to defend and support their family members, enjoyed more rights and subsequently a different status in Muslim society. The moral and religious equality of the sexes before God represents the highest expression of the value of equality. This is independent of and not subject to change of social situations. In the twentieth century, the social situation of women changed and consequently, the concept of "priority" of husband over wife in socio-economic sphere is subject to change.

### **Contextual Qur'anic verses need reinterpretation**

Contextual Qur'anic verses like polygamy, divorce, custody of children, inheritance and evidence must be reinterpreted in keeping with the spirit of the Qur'an. During twenty-three years of Muhammad's life some judgements changed according to the change of situation. Hence today after a thousand years many verses should be abrogated with absolute *ijtihad* (interpretation). The fundamental questions facing Muslims today are those that confronted the early jurists: What is the moral imperative which the Holy Qur'an had brought from God? How does it read when translated into the language of obligation pertinent to the concrete situations of real life?<sup>11</sup>

The Qur'an, the fundamental textual source of the Shariah is an ethico-religious revelation. It is the source from which the specific regulations of substantive law are derived through human effort. Exegesis is the means by which one can get at the motive, intent or purpose behind Qur'anic passages. Thus the exegetes study systematically the value system of the Qur'an and the hierarchization of its ethico-religious values. This method would resolve the

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<sup>11</sup>. Al-Faruqi, "Towards a New Theology for Qur'anic Exegesis" Islamic Studies (March, 1962) pp. 36-37

problems of *naskh* (abrogation, the suppression of one shariah rule by a later one where divergent regulations exist) as well as supply a reasonable explanation for the claim of the comprehensiveness of the Qur'an.

### **Islam should be modernised**

The main reason why Muslims in India are too conservative, sensitive and vulnerable to all suggestions for reform and change is that they are depending too much on the structure and customs which, they believe, give them a sense of security. Any deviation from the tradition or going out of the structure, they are afraid, would ruin Islam especially in India where the ruling group is non-Islamic. One may wonder why the ulama depend too much on the structure and tradition instead of abiding by the religious principles and ideals leaving the common man free.

When Mustafa Kamal Pasha of Turkey set up in 1920 a committee of the ulama to consider reform of family law in that country, after being in session for so many years the committee failed to agree on a single principle, and Mustafa Kamal had, in despair, to adopt the ready made Swiss Civil Code.

In India each group of ulama has its own interpretation of the Qur'an and Sunna. They will take ages to express a unanimous opinion on any reform to be applied to all Muslims alike. And even if they agree on any reform, they will not like the state taking action; it is evident from the reaction to the Supreme Court verdict in Shah Bano case. They (the ulama in India) would agree neither to the role of the legislature to make laws for Muslims nor to the function of the executive to introduce reforms by administrative measures. Even if they agree that a certain reform is necessary they would like to effect it under their authority and vigilance, and not by legislative or administrative action.

### **Muslim women in India have a vital role to play for bringing about these reforms**

The educated and emancipated Muslim women in India should take the initiative to promote education among

women so that they may become aware of their rights and privileges. They should demand the removal of the veil which is offensive and degrading. They should use their right to choose life partners and stipulate conditions for recognizing equal rights to the couple. To confine the power of divorce to the court, to which recourse can be made equally by husband and wife, would in a way curb the frequency of divorce. This procedure would be more compatible with the principle of equality. Every Muslim divorcee should go to the court if the husband hesitates to give her maintenance. She should fight against the man's unbridled right to contract a bigamous marriage irrespective of his need for an additional wife and of his ability to comply with the Qur'anic requirements of equitable justice between co-wives.

### **Conclusion**

It is clear that the social condition of the Muslim women in India is deplorable. Enslaved, oppressed and humiliated as they are, they are clamouring for freedom, equality and human dignity. The attitude and approach of the Indian ulama can never be conducive to solving the problem. As we have seen earlier the ulama in India are divided and hold contradictory views regarding shariah and its interpretation.

What is the way out? Who, other than the State, will save the Muslim community in India from this impasse? It is clear that the need of the hour is a family reform to be brought about by a uniform civil code for all religions touching the sphere of marriage, divorce, custody of children, maintenance, adoption and inheritance.

In formulating such a uniform civil code it should not be an extension of the Hindu code to the other communities. The new code should incorporate the good elements from all the personal laws currently in force in India or abroad. Since unification of family law is clearly permissible under our Constitution, it is our duty to work for it.

## Meditation on the Bank of the Yamuna

Sitting by the banks of the Yamuna I reflect on the request of the editor of *Jeevadhara* to write for its issue on women's theology. Should a man speak on the topic at all? Can he make a useful contribution to the movement, or should he not rather "keep silent in the Church", let the women speak of what they know? Can he afford to show himself a supporter without being paternalistic, without putting on elder-brotherly airs? Should he rather simply applaud from the stand without participating in the event? Or must he join the struggle on the arena and risk losing his sex identity? There is certainly no neutral ground, neither feminine nor masculine, from which to look at the movement. One is necessarily related to it, one way or another.

I see the quiet waters of the Yamuna peacefully flow down uninterrupted; it occurs to me that men must not be silent about what is happening in the flow of the Church stream. Too much is at stake there. For ultimately the Church will not have a truly Christian anthropology unless it hears and assimilates women's self-understanding expressed in their theology. Man himself will not have an authentic self-understanding unless it includes in itself the self-understanding of women. In Marianne Katoppo's book: *Compassionate and Free, An Asian woman's Theology*, chapter 2 is entitled "Woman's Liberation is also Man's"<sup>1</sup>.

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1. Chapter 2 of *Compassionate and Free, An Asian woman's theology*, Geneva, World Council of Churches, 1979/1981.

Not so many years ago the feminist movement would draw only amused smiles, if not cynical jokes, in theological common rooms... Today no serious theologian can honestly dismiss what women's theology has said and continues to say, and no theological course is complete that does not include a serious study of this movement. Not much later we were told that the feminist movement — "made in the U.S.A." — was a Western product with little relevance for India or for the East in general. The women in our culture had *not* lost their identity, and did *not* need the strident voices of the feminists... One can still hear, in a situation of dialogue, almost every ethnic or religious group come out with the claim that "in my community women are very highly respected, they are actually equal; nay superior to men... They are the queens of the home..." etc., etc. Today, six years after *Manushi*<sup>2</sup> and with daily news about bride-burnings, such claims sound hollow and hypocritical.

The women's theology movement must be studied and seen not just as corrective to a history of almost exclusive male theology and as a protest against the subordination of women in so many contemporary societies. It must also be seen as an integral dimension of the wholesome Christian understanding of Reality as it is. In other words, a Christian anthropology will not be authentically Christian or theological if it does not fully integrate the insights and valid claims of the feminist movement. And we shall not understand God or Christ or the Church, unless our anthropology is wholesome and integral.

Women's theology is relevant to India at least in two different ways. First, because no less than Western society, Indian society needs a conversion, a radical change towards an wholesome view of woman and man and their relationship to one another. The new understanding must admittedly be Asian, Indian, rooted in our cultural ethos, and incorporate many of the forgotten insights of the Indian tradi-

<sup>2</sup>. *Manushi* is a politically alive Journal about women in society, published from New Delhi (CI/202 Lajpat Nagar I, N. D. 110024).

ion. It cannot be imported from a foreign culture. But it must not thereby cease to be a challenge to what is evil in our male-dominated society and its undeniable oppression of women. It must offer a faith vision in which our sister may find a more satisfactory expression of their feminine being — and thereby our brothers a more wholesome understanding of their own masculine existence!

The second reason why women's theology appears to me relevant in India is because the ancient cultural traditions of India can offer rich veins of thought and symbolism to be explored towards an integral, ecumenical, universal and Christian theology. In this regard the traditions of India enrich not a little the self-understanding of the women of the world. They can also offer a deep new insight into our understanding of God.

Women's theology has successfully challenged the traditional picture we have formed of God which subconsciously colours our perception of the divine and the human reality. Of course, we always knew that God is beyond sex and gender, neither male nor female, but our articulation about God and our prayer to him followed always the patriarchal tradition: "Our Father who art in heaven..." Some will say that what was good for Jesus should be good enough for us. To say this is to be unfaithful to Jesus Himself. To reject from the Christian understanding, and language what has developed in human consciousness in the course of the last twenty centuries would not be consonant with the spirit of him who said courageously and repeatedly: "It was said of old... but I say to you."

As I sit silently on the bank of the Yamuna I can hear the temple bells announcing the evening *sandhyā* and the cadence of the popular *arati* prayer:

*mātā pitā tum mere śaran̄ gahūm kiski  
tum bin aur na dūja skaru jisaki*

"You are my mother and father, to whom else should I go for shelter. There is no one else but you, from whom I can expect something", which is itself an echo of older Sanskrit prayers with the same sentiments. God is both

Mother and Father. A mental picture of God as exclusively Father misses much of the divine maternal traits which women's theology has uncovered in the Bible. Such picture impoverishes our perception of the divine, and creates a mentality in which the maternal role is subordinate to the paternal. It thus establishes the first hierarchy, the most primitive form of the "caste system" which the world has produced. We have the *homo hierarchicus* instead of that *primaevae* vision of equality according to which "God created human beings, making them to be like himself, male and female he created them", as the Good News Bible translates Gen 1:27. The change of this vision for the hierarchical understanding can indeed be called the original fall !

Thus we are entitled by our own tradition to call God Mother and Father, in the words of the old Sanskrit prayers. Another alternative has been tried, a word that expresses what is beyond gender: *Brahman*, a neuter noun. But what is "beyond gender" can mean also what is "without gender", that is the *napumsaka* (another sexist word !) the eunuch... So the neuter form can suggest rather defect than plenitude, and it suits more the lower forms of existence than the personal God in whose image male and female were made. In our experience, gender, or rather the sexual existence, to which gender refers, is intimately related to the perception of life and of personhood. God must be seen not as *beyond* gender and sex, but as *integrating* both male and female. India has balanced the language of God as Brahman (neuter) with the no less important and no less Indian bipolar presentation of the Divinity : God and his Consort, Shiva and Shakti, Radha and Krishna. God is two, yet only one.

Many sects in the Indian tradition will have some form of the divine dyad. A handy and scholarly work on the topic with a useful bibliography is *The Divine Consort: Rādhā and the Goddesses of India*<sup>3</sup>. The book shows how

3. By John Stratton Hawley and Donna Marie Wulff, Delhi, Motilal Banarsi Dass 1982. The book contains a very useful bibliography of publications related to the Feminine theology in the Hindu tradition.

in various and overlapping perceptions of the Divine Reality the couple stands not so much for the maternal-paternal functions — though origination of the world is certainly attributed to the Dyad — but for the polarity of genders. They are the type of the male and the female in the universe, and of their relationship. Eros is of course an aspect of the picture. But the erotic is a "sacrament" of the divine. "In his own image he created them, male and female he created them."

As I reflect on the bank of the river another important symbol of the divine presence and grace, which is also feminine, manifests herself to me. She is the river, specially Mother Ganges as she is so affectionately invoked in North Indian popular religion<sup>4</sup>. Unlike as in Latin and Greek and most modern western languages, rivers in India are feminine (*nadi*). So are the waters (*apah*), which are charming, cleansing, playful, life-giving, sacred. They come from heaven down to earth, not only in the rain but specially in the descent of the Ganga from its divine abode, through the tresses of the great Mountain God Siva. The waters are invoked to come to earth to give life, or to give back life to the ashes of the 60,000 sons of Sagar, and to bring life to the millions that depend on this water — rain and the Ganga — for their daily food. And so, as the Yamuna pursues its silent course towards the Ganga I am led into a meditation on what the feminist symbols of life tell us about the mystery of Reality.

The feminist theology is an aspect of liberation theology movement. It must therefore necessarily focus its attention on the problems not only of women but of all weak sections of society. It must express a strong commitment to the liberating action of God, as Mary's song does, that action whereby the bonds that enslave the weak and oppressed are broken away. Durga, the great Divine Mother, is essentially a liberating Goddess<sup>5</sup>. That powerful myth needs

4. See the meditation of Sr Vandana, *Waters of Fire*. Madras, Christian Literature Society, 1981.

5. See Subhash Anand, "The Lady and the Demon", *Vidyajyoti* 50 (1986) 454-468.

to be "historicized" in our midst and by us. And it is not enough to bemoan the evils of the outside society: we need also a clear perception of the marginalization which women experience in the Church. In either case, an authentic feminist theology will not be interested in explaining the world but in changing it.

The linguistic reform to which the feminist movement has introduced us is only the beginning of more profound changes in mental perceptions and cultural expressions. These must reach even our contemplative lives. We must get accustomed to integrate the insights of women theology into our prayer, personal or communitarian, because a theology that does not express itself in prayer has no value.\*

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6. See Katoppo, l. c. p. 65.

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\* A Community Celebration of Womanhood, composed by the writer as the crown of his meditation has been omitted for want of space (General Editor).

## The Gospels and the Liberation of Asian Women

Women in Asia are triply oppressed: as citizens of the third world, as workers and as women. This was the conclusion reached by the participants of the Asia Partnership for Human Development at their Consultation held in Bombay in 1983<sup>1</sup>. In its analysis of the situation of women, the Consultation said that women are treated as inferior in society, denied their rights to participate in decision-making and refused opportunities to develop as full human beings. Often too women are victims of rape and other forms of violence. As part of the most exploited and oppressed groups, industrial women workers are treated as cheap, docile and dispensable labour because of the practical difficulties women workers face to organize themselves to voice their grievances. Women in the sex industry, which flourishes in tourist centres and round military bases, are used as commodities and are treated as social outcastes. Women among the urban poor live in constant threat of eviction and economic dislocation and are denied their basic rights to proper housing, facilities and services. Rural women are forced to work long hours at home and in the fields and are often paid unequal wages, if paid at all. All this gives us an idea of the bleak situation of women in Asia today.

What has been said of women in Asia is doubly true of women in India. Because of its enormous poverty and oppressive social system which sustains it, the

1. Cf. the Statement of the consultation of the Asian Partnership for Human Development, held in Bombay on October 24th to November 2nd, 1983.

problems of Indian women — abject poverty, economic dependence, the double burden of work inside and outside home, decline of job opportunities, high illiteracy rates, poor health, are accentuated and aggravated by new forms of oppression — caste atrocities and dowry deaths. The situation of women in India could scarcely be worse.

In the light of what has been said above it will be useful to investigate what the Gospels have to say about the position of women and about Jesus' attitude towards them. Here the Gospels will be studied in order to understand and appreciate the attitude Jesus had towards women and secondly to appreciate unconventional roles played by several women as presented by the evangelists. But first we shall have to be aware of the social condition of women during Jesus' time. Only then shall we be able to discern the teaching of Jesus from the cultural phenomenon of his day.

#### A. The social condition of women in the time of Jesus

Joachim Jeremias gives us some valuable information regarding the social position of women at that time. He says that it was typical that joy reigned at the birth of a boy (Jer 20:15) while the birth of a daughter was often treated with indifference, even with sorrow<sup>2</sup>. From this alone we get the impression that Judaism in Jesus' time also had a very low opinion of women as was usual in the ancient world. Added to this there was the prayer ritual by Jewish males three times a day:

Blessed be God that he has not made me a gentile.  
Blessed be God that he has not made me a woman.  
Blessed be God that he has not made me a slave<sup>3</sup>.

This again shows the low status in which women were during the time of Jesus.

2. Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1969) 375.

3. T. Berekot 7.18, quoted in Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her* (New York: Crossroads, 1984) 217.

Women were expected to remain unobserved in public. There is a recorded saying of one of the oldest scribes, Jose B. Johanan of Jerusalem (c. 250 BC): 'Talk not much with womankind'; to this was added, 'They said this of a man's own wife; how much more of his fellow's wife'<sup>4</sup>. Rules of propriety forbade a man to be alone with a woman<sup>5</sup>. It was considered disgraceful for a scholar to speak with a woman in the street. A woman who conversed with everyone in the street could be divorced without the payment prescribed in the marriage settlement<sup>6</sup>. It was Philo who said: 'Market places and council halls, law courts and gatherings... in short all public life with its discussions and deeds, in times of peace and of war are proper for men. It is suitable for women to stay indoors'<sup>7</sup>. But should a Jewess of Jerusalem be compelled to leave her house, her face was hidden by an arrangement of two head veils, a head band on the forehead with bands to the chin, and a hairnet with ribbons and knots, so that her features could not be recognized<sup>8</sup>.

The married woman's first duties were those of the household. She had to grind meal, bake, wash, cook, suckle the children, prepare the husband's bed and, as repayment for her keep, to work the wool by spinning and weaving. Other duties were that of preparing her husband's cup, and of washing his face, hands and feet<sup>9</sup>. But even as a widow too she was held bound to her husband, that is, if he died without leaving a son<sup>10</sup>. In this case she had to wait until the brother or brothers of her dead husband should contract a levirate marriage with her or publish a refusal to do so; without this refusal she could not remarry<sup>11</sup>.

Women were not allowed the study of the Torah: R. Eliezer (c. AD 90) tireless upholder of the old tradition says impressively, 'If a man gives his daughter knowledge

4. Jeremias, *Jerusalem* (n. 2 above) 360.

5. *Ibid.* (cf. also Jn 4:27).

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Ibid.* 8. *Ibid.* 359.

10. *Ibid.* 372 (cf. also Dt 25:5-10; Mk 12, 18-27).

11. *Ibid.* (cf. also 1 Cor 14:34-36; 1 Tim 2:8-15).

9. *Ibid.* 369.

of the Law, it is as though he taught her lechery<sup>12</sup>. Jeremias observes that in those days schools were solely for boys and not for girls<sup>13</sup>.

It is only against this background in the time of Jesus can we proceed to study the Gospels and fully appreciate Jesus' attitude towards women as well as the unconventional roles played by several women as presented by the evangelists, unprecedented in the history of that time.

## B. Jesus and women in the gospels

In studying this topic, first we will take a few 'women episodes' in the Synoptics — namely the Galilean women followers of Jesus (Lk 8:1-3), the woman with the flow of blood (Mt 9:20-22; Mk 5:25-34; Lk 8:43-48), the woman bent over (Lk 13:10-17), and finally the episode of the Syro-phoenician woman (Mt 15:21-29; Mk 7:24-39). After studying these accounts in the Synoptics, we shall proceed to study the Gospel of John. For our discussion of John's Gospel, we shall take the story of the Samaritan woman (4:4-42), the sisters of Bethany (11:1-44; 12:1-8), and Mary Magdalene (19:20; 20:1-2; 11-18). We omit the story of the adulteress because its tradition is non-Johannine and interpolated.

### 1. Women in the Synoptics

The well known feminist Judy Chicago has pointed out the great potential for power that lies for women in discovering their heritage. In order to show this she wrote a book titled: *The Dinner Party: A Symbol of Our Heritage*<sup>14</sup>. To this symbolic Dinner Party both men and women were invited. But none of the women invitees could lay claim to anything of significance because neither culture nor religion gave importance to women. She observes: "Sadly most of the 1038 women included in the Dinner Party are unfamiliar, their lives and achievements unknown to most of us. To make people feel worthless, society robs them of their pride: this has happened to women. All the institutions of our culture tell us — through

12. *Ibid.* 373,

13. *Ibid.*

14. Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party: A Symbol of Our Heritage* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1979).

words, deeds and even worse, silence — that we are insignificant. But our heritage is our power.”<sup>15</sup>

However, it is not so when Christian woman turns to the Gospels as a source of her power; with pride she is able to claim relationship to women, her mothers and sisters who have gone before her and have displayed an enormous strength of character and an ingenuity so typical of women.

a. The Galilean women followers of Jesus (Lk 8:1-3)

Going against all conventions of that time, Luke mentions that along with the twelve some women too followed Jesus from town to village in his preaching. Some of these women are mentioned by name. Luke also says that these women provided for Jesus and the Twelve out of their means. Why does Luke introduce women followers into the story of Jesus' Galilean ministry? Fitzmyer is of the opinion that it indicates a recollection about Jesus which differed radically from the usual understanding of women's role in contemporary Judaism. The women are depicted by Luke as ministering to Jesus and the Twelve in roles surprising for their day: providing for them, and from their own means; and at least one of them is mentioned as a married woman (Joanna). In introducing these women followers here, Luke is foreshadowing their role at Jesus' cross (23:49) and at the empty tomb (24:10).

This Lukan account shows us that Jesus although a Jew and teacher accepted women among his close circle of disciples who followed him from place to place. It also shows us the calibre of these women who dared to travel with a wandering preacher supporting him with their own means. They not only follow Jesus in his ministry, but they follow him up to the cross (23:49). The following does not stop there. Their loyalty and devotion does not end with Jesus' death: 'The women who had come with him from Galilee followed and saw the tomb, and how his body was laid. Then they returned and prepared spices and ointments' (24:55). And rightly they are also the first to dis-

15. *Ibid*, 246-49.

cover the empty tomb and learn from the angel that Jesus has risen (24:10). If loyalty is the hallmark of true discipleship, then certainly these Galilean women qualify as remarkably loyal disciples. Does this not indicate that with the coming of Jesus, a new era has dawned for women? Jesus certainly treated women with equality and dignity. And there is no doubt that the women responded.

b. The woman with the flow of blood

(Mt 9:20-22; Mk 5:24-34; Lk 8:43-48)

All the Synoptics report the episode of the woman suffering from the flow of blood, who touched the fringe of the garment of Jesus. It is a touching scene, no doubt. It is Mark who gives most details. That the woman suffered much under many physicians, spent all that she had and was no better but rather grew worse. Truly her predicament was great. She was bound by many fetters physical, social, psychological, cultural and economic. She was physically weak because for twelve long years she had suffered from a continuous loss of blood, therefore prone to other diseases (physical fetter). According to the Law as given in Lev 15:19-31 she was considered 'impure' and debarred from social contact (social fetter). She was thus regarded an outcaste (psychological and cultural fetters); and finally she had lost all she had by paying physicians (economic fetter). However, her faith in Jesus was great and she decided to be liberated from her bondage whatever be the cost. She knew only too well the repercussions of her daring, should the crowd come to know of her present state. Yet she risked it and took the plunge. She came behind Jesus and touched his garment because of the faith that prompted her from within: 'If I touch even his garments, I shall be made well' (Mk 5:28). Jesus was quick to discern that power had gone out of him. He was not in the least concerned with the Law that pronounced him unclean for he had been touched by an impure woman (Lev 15:19), but moved by her tremendous faith Jesus addressed her as daughter. Not only did he use endearing language but also rendered her whole:

Could we not say the same of our own women? We

have already had a glimpse into the bleak situation of Asian women. Many are the fetters by which they remain oppressed. However, the Gospel story tells us that for those who have faith as strong as this woman's and are ready to take the plunge, there is also hope that they too will be liberated from their long suffering. This story is certainly a challenge to the Asian women not to accept passively what society has allotted them, but dare to get liberated and actively take the initiative to make it a reality.

### c. The woman bent over (Lk 13:10-17)

We read of yet another story of the healing of a woman mentioned exclusively by Luke. The story speaks of a woman 'who had a spirit of infirmity for eighteen years; she was bent over and could not fully straighten herself'. As always Jesus' eyes fall on the needy — in this instance on this woman, one among the crowd who has come for Sabbath worship. The setting in which Luke places the miracle is important. It is on the Sabbath and in the Synagogue. Jesus interrupted his Sabbath teaching in the Synagogue, called the woman and healed her of her long drawn out debilitating infirmity. He not only called her but touched her and immediately she was made straight and she praised God.

In this account of Luke, there are quite a few points to be taken note of in the light of our present discussion. There are in fact four parties involved and each party throws light on our present discussion: Jesus — woman — ruler of the Synagogue — crowd. Jesus considered healing the woman who had been bent over for eighteen long years and making her straight more important than keeping the Sabbath Law and teaching in the Synagogue. The woman although 'bent over' because of her infirmity, yet came into the Synagogue on the Sabbath out of great piety to praise God. The ruler of the Synagogue became indignant because Jesus healed on the Sabbath. All the people, however, rejoiced at what was done by Jesus.

As I reflect on the role played by each of these four parties, I recognize that the episode is symbolic of our present situation of oppressed women in the Asian context.

Jesus by his example, makes it clear that he desires all women be given their due dignity. God did not create her 'bent', it was the spirit of infirmity that made her so. Therefore what Jesus did was to restore her to the dignity given her by God. The priority Jesus gives to the liberation of women is very clear because in the story the healing of the woman and making her straight takes precedence even over Sabbath teaching and worship. The role played by the woman in the story displays a magnanimity of spirit of which all womankind could be proud of. Even in the midst of great suffering her heart is full of praise for God. A better translation of v.13 would be: "And he laid his hands upon her, and immediately she was made straight; and she continued to praise God." She no doubt is an '*anaw*' of Yahweh. The ruler of the Synagogue betrays typical patriarchal legalism. He is angry for no other reason but that the woman was made straight on the Sabbath. Finally all the people rejoiced at the glorious things that were done by Jesus. Yes, all those imbued with the spirit of Jesus will rejoice when women are restored to the dignity and equality that are due to them.

Is not this woman symbolic of our Asian women, the majority of whom live below the poverty line because of oppression and exploitation? Does not this woman represent the many Indian women who carry an unbelievable burden of indebtedness and are 'bent over' with anxiety and insecurity for money borrowed from unscrupulous money lenders who lend money at exorbitant rates of interest?

Jesus who came to heal and make whole, takes the initiative and relieves the woman of her distress. By his action Jesus reminded the ruler of the Synagogue the primary purpose why the Sabbath had been declared a day of rest from all work. The ruler of the Synagogue was holding tight to the outer husk of the Sabbath law having lost the kernal of it. He would not hesitate to care for the household animals by loosening the tether and leading them from the feeding trough to water, but would object to a human being healed on the Sabbath! Jesus defended

the rights of this woman and her equality in society saying: 'Ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan had bound for eighteen years be loosed on the Sabbath ?'

d. The Syro-phoenician woman (Mt 15:21-29; Mk 7:24-39)

Finally in our study of the Synoptics to reclaim the heritage of women, we take up the episode of the Syro-phoenician woman. Perhaps this is the only incident in the Gospels where, engaged in a theological debate or controversy, Jesus apparently loses. This Gentile woman is presented as capable of tremendous faith, daring courage, incredible persistence and perseverance, and forthright logical argument. Knowing well that she is a Gentile and Jesus a Jew she dares to approach Jesus with a request, namely, she asks him to heal her daughter possessed by an unclean spirit. Jesus rebuffs her with such harsh language that even a strong personality would have recoiled within and withdrawn: 'let the children first be fed, for it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs' (Mk 7:27). But the woman bounces back with the same words Jesus threw at her. She answered: 'Yes, Lord, even dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs' (Mk 7:28). Women like the earth have enormous capacity to suffer and so this Greek woman neither takes offence nor withdraws because what is at stake is the life of her daughter. She plucks up courage and retorts to Jesus. Jesus is quick to respond: further, he commands her for her quick wit and forceful argument and says: "For this saying you may go your way; the demon has left your daughter". Thus this Syro-phoenician woman goes into the annals of women's heritage not only as a mother who by her adroit argument got her daughter liberated but also as the woman theologian who convincingly proved that all nations, both Jews and Gentiles should have their fill from the Lord's table.

In this story, Jesus probably was only repeating a saying that was prevalent in his time: 'He who eats with an idolater is like one who eats with a dog'<sup>16</sup>. However

16. H.B. Swete, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (London: Macmillan, 1905) 158.

women in the third world know only too well the sharp pain that tugs at their maternal hearts as they daily watch their own children fight with crows and dogs to get a bit of stale food from the garbage bins that lie by the way side. Surely the time has come for women to speak up and plead the cause of hunger. Mother Theresa of Calcutta represents womankind who has become aware of the needs of the times and has dared to speak up both by word and example. It is up to other women too, to draw strength from the Gospel story and work tirelessly for the day when no child will go to bed hungry.

The Syro-phoenician woman has also a message for the thousands of women workers in the Free Trade Zones in Asia. They work in unbelievably dehumanizing working conditions. Should they complain, they know what answer they would get: 'If you are not happy you can leave, there are enough and more waiting to come in'. Through fear of losing the little they have, Asian women workers tend to be passive and allow themselves to be exploited. In the struggle for justice, there would certainly be at least a few martyrs — but this is the inevitable price the women should be ready to pay if they are to win their just demands. By arguing, the Syro-phoenician woman succeeded to liberate her daughter; likewise, by protesting, perhaps this generation will not live to reap the harvest, but we can be certain that exploitation and injustice would not be perpetuated.

## 2. Women in the Gospel of John

In this section we shall deal with Johannine texts concerning women. A careful study of the fourth Gospel makes it clear to us certain general characteristics of women portrayed by John. All the women in the fourth Gospel are presented positively. From beginning to end, they are presented as believing (11:27), hospitable and understanding (12:2-3), loyal (19:25), and persevering (20:1). This does not mean to say that the woman portrayed in John's Gospel are stereotypes. What catches the feminine eye is the originality, creativity and initiative of each woman in the Gospel. And so while all the women share in positive

qualities, each one is remarkably unique.

The author of the fourth Gospel was someone who had a remarkably rich and nuanced understanding of feminine religious experience. Historically this knowledge could have been the product of an active literary imagination. But it is much more likely that it was the result of actual experience of Christian women who played prominent roles in the community of the fourth evangelist<sup>17</sup>. If women Christians in John's community had been restricted to the domestic and religious roles of women in the Jewish world of that time it is very difficult to imagine where the evangelist got his extraordinary rich insights into the relationship of women with Jesus.

Another characteristic of the women in John's Gospel is that they all play unconventional roles. Whether it be the Samaritan woman at the well, or Mary and Martha at the death of Lazarus, or Mary of Bethany anointing the feet of Jesus or Mary Magdalene fearlessly looking for the body of Jesus on Easter Sunday, none of these women seek male permission nor help. They do what they discern has to be done at a given moment. They are strong characters who with feminine intuition perceive what is needed and have the daring to carry it out even though they face criticism. Let us examine the episodes.

#### a. The woman from Samaria (4:4-42)

We all know that there are excellent commentaries on this episode. Yet, I wish to draw attention to a few points that usually escape the male exegete. We know much has been made of this passage mainly about the immoral condition in which the woman was found. However what is striking is the openness of the woman to Jesus who admits that she has lived with five and yet none has been her legal husband. To focus one's attention on the sinful condition of the woman is to miss the wood for the trees. What is of utmost importance here is Jesus' self revelation to a

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17. Raymond Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979) 186.

woman as the Messiah whom the Samaritans expect (4:25). What is equally important is the woman's response: She leaves the water jar immediately and goes to the city to announce that she has found the Messiah (4:28). This is a typical way of responding to the call of discipleship namely to 'leave all things' especially one's present occupation, whether symbolized by boats (Mt 4:19-22), tax office (Mt 9:9) or a water jar. The third striking point is the reaction of the disciples who return from the city and discover Jesus conversing with a woman (4:27). Raymond Brown correctly translates it as: 'they were shocked'<sup>18</sup>. They were shocked not only because Jesus was found to be in conversation with a Samaritan which was prohibited by Jewish law but also because of the law which prevailed at the time of Jesus which forbade a man to be alone with a woman. But the disciples dared not ask him why he was speaking to the woman. Jesus made them even more curious when he refused to eat the food brought by the disciples and said: "I have food to eat of which you do not know". So the disciples said to one another 'Has anyone brought him food'? Obviously suspicion had arisen in the minds of the disciples as to whether this woman had brought some food and Jesus had gone to the extent of eating it!

Because of the woman's testimony, many Samaritans came to believe in Jesus — the woman proved herself a true disciple. In the fourth Gospel a disciple is one who brings another to the Lord (cf. 1:42). This is significant because it occurs again in Jesus' priestly prayer for his disciples: 'It is not for these alone that I pray, but also for those who believe in me through their word' (17:20). Jesus is thus praying for her too as well as for the male disciples at the Last Supper.

#### b. The Sisters of Bethany (11:1-44; 12:1-8)

It is of no little importance that in the story of the resuscitation of Lazarus not only the man who is reported ill but even the village in which he lived is identified in

<sup>18</sup>, Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John, I-XII* (New York: Doubleday, Anchor Bible, 1971) 166,

reference to two women — Mary and her sister Martha (Vv. 1-4). It is also said in v.5 that 'Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus'. This is also significant because, as St. Thomas says in his *Summa*, order and place contribute to the intelligibility of a given fact. Not only the first five verses, but practically the entire chapter deals with these two women in their relation to Jesus. However in chapter 11 it is Martha who plays the more prominent role and Mary will come to the forefront in the following chapter.

When Lazarus falls ill, the two sisters take the initiative to send word to Jesus. And on hearing that Jesus is coming, it is Martha who goes to meet Jesus on the way. She is mourning the death of her brother and complains that had Jesus been there, he would not have died. Jesus challenges her with a fundamental question: 'I am the Resurrection and Life; he who believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?' It is true that at the beginning of the encounter with Jesus, Martha did not possess a full and mature faith. But now at this point she accepts the challenge put by Jesus: 'Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, he who is coming into the world' (11: 25-26) Usually and popularly what is remembered is Simon Peter's confession of faith in Jesus in Caesarea Philippi (Mt 16:15-19). But the Gospel of John gives us a parallel to Peter's Confession in 6:68-69, this story of the woman making a similar act of faith in Jesus.

In chapter 12 it is Mary who is presented in her relation to Jesus (12:1-8). In this episode let us dwell on the unconventional role played by Mary by anointing the feet of Jesus with expensive perfume and wiping them with her hair. All four Gospels speak of an anointing of Jesus by a woman (Mt 26:6-13; Mk 14:3-9; Lk 7:36-50). However it is John who has artfully drawn the beautiful picture of Mary of Bethany anointing the feet of Jesus. By so doing, Mary plays a prophetic role, namely preparing the body of Jesus for his burial. Also her action stands in contrast to that of the sanhedrin who conspired to kill Jesus (11:50). The raising of Lazarus had spurred two opposite reactions — the sanhedrin (men) conspired to kill Jesus and Mary was

impelled to show love and devotion by anointing his feet. However Judas complains and suggests that it would have been better had Mary sold the perfume and given alms to the poor. But Jesus defends her: 'let her alone' (12:7). Jesus not only accepts the act of tender devotion shown him by Mary but also approves and defends her. Mary on the other hand neither asks for permission from anyone, not even from Lazarus, nor apologizes for what she deems fit to be done. She asserts herself as a disciple of Jesus and assumes the right to decide how she should minister to him

#### c. Mary Magdalene (19:25; 20:1-2; 11-18)

If loyalty is the key characteristic of a true disciple, then according to John among the disciples of Jesus, only John and Mary Magdalene prove to be worthy disciples. By the time Jesus reaches Calvary, the story of the twelve is not only disappointing but even scandalous. One has betrayed, another has denied and all the others have fled through fear. And it is Mary who is found at the foot of the cross (19:25). It is she who discovers the empty tomb on the dawn of Easter (20:1-2), and fittingly it is she who is greeted first by the risen Jesus and given the apostolic mission to carry the good news of the resurrection to the other disciples (20:11-18).

Before John, the criteria given by Paul for authentic apostleship were to have seen the risen Lord and to have been sent to proclaim (cf. 1 Cor 9:1-2); 15:8-11; Gal 1:11-16). A key to Peter's importance among the apostles was the tradition that he was the first to see the risen Jesus (1 Cor 15:5; Lk 24:34). However Matthew recalls that the women who were leaving the empty tomb were the first to encounter the risen Jesus, but Matthew does not contrast the women with Peter. It is John who revises this tradition about Peter. In 20:2-10 Simon Peter and the Beloved Disciple go to the empty tomb and do not see Jesus; in fact, only the Beloved Disciple perceives the significance of the grave cloths and comes to believe. It is to a woman, Mary Magdalene, that Jesus first appears, instructing her to go and tell his 'brothers' (disciples: 20:17-18) of his ascension

to the Father. In the stories of the angel at the empty tomb, the women are given a message for the disciples, but in John, Mary Magdalene is sent by the risen Jesus himself and what she proclaims is the standard Apostolic announcement of the resurrection: 'I have seen the Lord'. In the fourth Gospel, therefore, it is not Peter but Mary Magdalene who is the first to see the risen Jesus.

In 10:3-5 John compares the disciples of Jesus to sheep who know their shepherd's voice when he calls them by name. This description too is fulfilled in the appearance of the risen Jesus to Mary Magdalene as she recognizes him when he calls her by her name 'Mary' (20:16). The point that Mary Magdalene can belong to Jesus' sheep is all the more important since in 10:3-5 the sheep are twice identified as 'his own', the same expression used at the beginning of the Last Supper: 'Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end' (13:1). It is clear that John has no hesitation in placing a woman in the same category of relationship to Jesus as the Twelve who are included among 'his own' in 13:1<sup>19</sup>.

### Conclusion

It is clear, then, that women play a much larger part in the Gospels than a casual reader might suspect. The part they play would have appeared still larger, if we had spoken about Mary the mother of Jesus, who figures conspicuously in the Gospels, particularly in those of Luke (1:26-56; 2:1-52) and John (2:1-11; 19:25-27). But Mary has a significance all her own. This has been extensively discussed in a number of recent publications<sup>20</sup>. Limitations of time and of the particular scope of this article (which attempts to study the attitude of the Gospels towards women as such, and not towards any particularly privileged women like Mary) have not allowed us to refer to it.

19. Brown, *Community* (See n. 18 above) 192.

20. Cf. Raymond Brown and Karl Donfried (eds), *Mary in the New Testament* (Philadelphia, Fortress, 1978); John McHugh, *The Mother of Jesus in the New Testament* (London, Darton, Longman & Todd, 1975).

But even without Mary the mother of Jesus, the part played by women in the Gospels is an unusually significant and positive one. Except for Herodias the unlawful wife of Herod Antipas and her daughter Salome, who with extraordinary vengefulness and cunning bring about the death of John the Baptist (Mk 6:14-29), women in the Gospels always appear in a strongly positive light. They are generous (Lk 8:1-3), believing (Mk 5:24-34,) persistant in their faith (Mk 7:24-39), enthusiastic when converted (Jn 4:27-42), affectionate and hospitable (Lk 10:38-42), unusually devoted (Jn 12:1-8), and exceptionally courageous and loyal (Mk 15:40-41; 16:1-8). Jesus gladly welcomes them into the company of his disciples, with no trace of condescension whatever (Lk 8:1-3; 10:38-42; Jn 20:1-18). If later, sexist discrimination creeps into the New Testament Church (1 Cor 14:34-36; 1 Tim 2:8-15) this is because the Christian community in its attempt to 'inculturate' into the hellenistic world takes up its social attitudes (just as the Indian Church has taken up the Hindu institution of caste), and fails to live up fully to the radical vision of Jesus. To the extent that such discrimination persists in the Church today, this too is a measure of a similar failure on our part. In the face of the sexist discrimination of his times, Jesus affirmed the dignity of women and the radical equality of all human beings (Mt 23:8-12; Gal 3:28). To discriminate against women — in any form — is thus to go against Jesus.

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